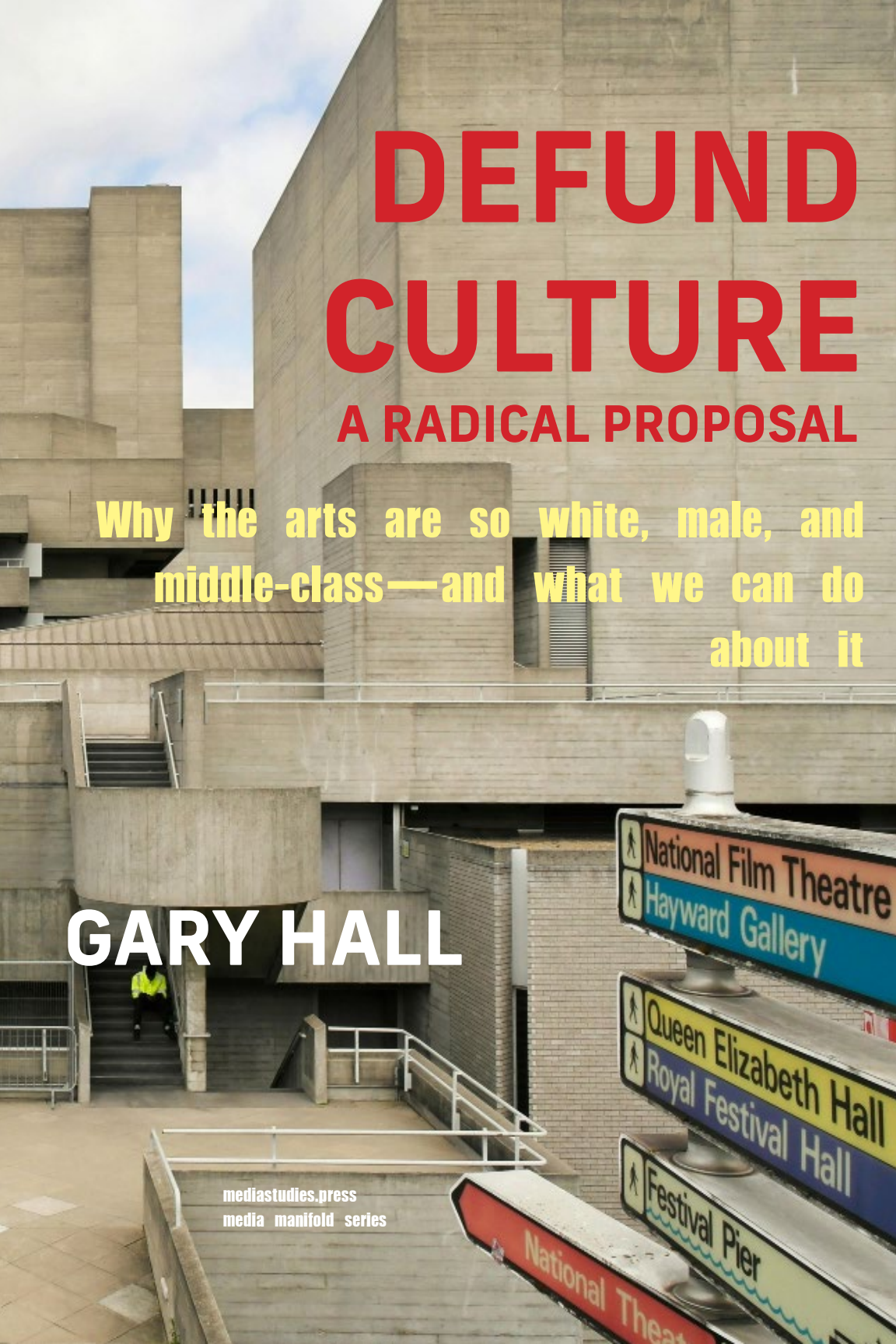
DEFUND CULTURE

A RADICAL PROPOSAL

Why the arts are so white, male, and middle-class—and what we can do about it



GARY HALL

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Defund Culture: A Radical Proposal

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Preamble

You can, as the saying goes, rise *out* of your class. You can go to university, move to the capital, get a job that supports your art and writing, maybe even win a prize or two. But you can't rise *with* your class. That's why most people don't even try to change or break the system—they concentrate instead on figuring out how they can get on *within* it.

Focusing on the arts, media, publishing, and the university, *Defund Culture* explores ways to flip this script and transform the system itself. It shows how funding and support in the UK's creative industries go overwhelmingly to upper- and middle-class, privately educated, Oxbridge graduates. Accordingly, *Defund Culture* argues for resources and opportunities to be disinvested from the cultural sphere as it currently exists and for redistributing them to other sectors of society, with a view to generating art, media, and creativity that are more diverse and less homogeneous, anti-intellectual, and, frankly, boring.

That said, a social media post that did the rounds in 2025 asked: "Why do cultural crit essays all end like 'We will have to create communism together, with dreaming, and dreaming will create what we can see. Only through seeing will we see the world that is to come.'" This is precisely what *Defund Culture* wants to avoid.

To come at it from a slightly different angle: In her 2023 book *Doppelgänger*, Naomi Klein attributes a certain weariness to the environmental activist Greta Thunberg. Klein suggests Thunberg "no longer believes in that theory of change" where delivering a speech to centrist political leaders about the climate crisis, the green economy, building back better, and achieving net zero by 2050 will lead to meaningful action on their part. Like many of us, Thunberg has realized "that no one is coming to save us but us, and whatever action we can leverage through our cooperation, organization,

and solidarities." She now reserves her words for "spaces where they still might matter," where they can still be aligned with "principles and actions," where people are not merely saying the right things. *Defund Culture* wants to do something similar: highlight steps that we, as writers, intellectuals, academics, scholars, and media theorists, can take ourselves to address the issues it explores. This is why the book is divided into two interconnected parts: If the first can be understood as a diagnosis, the second provides a set of more practical propositions.

PART 1

WHY THE ARTS ARE SO WHITE, MALE, AND MIDDLE-CLASS

CHAPTER ONE

The Culture Wars and Attack on the Arts

For more than a decade, the British Conservative Party, supported by the country's right-wing media, relied heavily on a hostility to one of the mainstays of the postwar liberal world order, the European Union, to help win elections and remain in power.[1] Aware it's far easier to unite people as an imagined community around what they are *not* than what they *are*, it achieved this by linking the grievances of different sections of society—regarding immigration, national sovereignty, the liberal elite—at least enough to be able to form a government.

After Britain's January 2020 withdrawal from the EU, however, Brussels and its professional class of political technocrats could no longer be blamed quite so convincingly for the UK's problems. What we saw in the aftermath of Brexit was the Conservative Party devoting more of its attention to the *wider* "culture wars" it had instigated to impose its values and beliefs on society during the Vote Leave campaign of 2016. The total number of articles published in the UK press each year concentrating on the "existence or nature" of the culture wars increased dramatically from a mere twenty-one in 2015 to 534 in 2020 (Duffy et al. 2021, 4). There were further huge rises in the years that immediately followed: from 1,869 in 2021 to 2,224 in 2022, for instance (Duffy et al. 2023).

[1] *Defund Culture* is derived from material that was initiated in two journal articles (Hall 2022, 2023a). All of this work has been revised and substantially extended for the purpose of this book.

Yet the conflict was far from confined to the pages of newspapers and magazines. It was also conducted on the battlefield of the country's elite institutions. One striking example was the reaction to the National Trust heritage charity's acknowledgement in 2020 that almost a third of the stately homes it owns, including Winston Churchill's country estate Chartwell, have historical links to slavery and colonialism. This revelation sparked outrage among Conservative figures, with Sir John Hayes, a former minister and the founder and chair of the Common Sense Group of Conservative MPs, going so far as to tell the House of Commons that "defending our history and heritage is our era's Battle of Britain" (*Daily Express* 2020). A group of "anti-woke" insurgents called Restore Trust was even established to fight this aspect of the culture wars by seeking to have its candidates elected to the National Trust's governing council and return it to its "original apolitical [*sic*] ethos" (Restore Trust 2022). (The term "woke" is applied pejoratively by the right to those on the left who are attentive to issues of social injustice and inequality. To be "woke" is to affect a moral virtue that is lacking in reality. "Anti-woke" refers to the attempt by those on the right to reframe such attentiveness as a threat to the established order, and to rebrand their own prejudice and discrimination as a form of common-sense resistance to such left-liberal values and hypocrisy.) Nor were these insurgents some fringe group. In August 2022, Zewditu Gebreyohanes, then a director of Restore Trust, was appointed by the government to the role of trustee of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Another flashpoint was the controversy surrounding the BBC's 2020 *Last Night of the Proms*. Reports circulated that the patriotic songs "Rule, Britannia!" and "Land of Hope and Glory" were to be dropped as a result of pressure from racial justice movements, due their associations with colonialism and slavery. The event was quickly dubbed the "Black Lives Matter Proms," sparking an intervention from Oliver Dowden, then secretary of state for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport. Dowden stated that he shared the "concerns of many" about the "potential removal" of these songs and that he had raised the issue with the BBC. "Confident forward-looking nations don't erase their history, they add to it," he declared (2020a). Later, having become co-chairman of the Conservative Party, Dowden doubled down on this idea. In a 2022 speech to the US-based Heritage Foundation think tank, he claimed that a "West confident in its values would not be obsessing over pronouns or indeed seeking to decolonize mathematics" (Dowden 2022b).

The so-called decolonization agenda within the country's museums and galleries also became a site of conflict. In 2021 Dowden was involved again, this time in the vetoing of Dr. Aminul Hoque, a lecturer in the Educational Studies Department at Goldsmiths College, University of London, from being reappointed to serve a second term as a member of the board of trustees of the Royal Museums Greenwich because of his reported backing for decolonization. It is worth emphasizing that these were not the attitudes of an eccentric outlier within the Conservative Party. Dowden, often described as a "warrior against woke," went on to be Rishi Sunak's right-hand man when he succeeded Liz Truss as prime minister, ultimately being promoted to deputy PM after Dominic Raab resigned in April 2023 following allegations of bullying.

Declaring war on the "wokeism" that was held as leading to the removal of statues (such as that commemorating Bristol slaver Edward Colston) or to the renaming of buildings (including Edinburgh University's David Hume Tower because of the philosopher's writings on race), had several other advantages during this period. It distracted from the UK government's disastrous handling of the coronavirus contagion and Omicron wave, as well as Afghanistan, Brexit, and the economy: the rising energy prices and food, labor, and petrol shortages. And that's without mentioning the revelations concerning cronyism, corruption, and the Partygate scandal over social gatherings of Conservative Party staff during the pandemic, despite such events being prohibited. The February 24, 2022, invasion of Ukraine by Russia and its domination of the news cycles saw the Conservatives calling something of a truce in the culture wars. Yet, as with so much of what they did at this time, the ceasefire was less an indication of a change of ideological conviction on their part and more a matter of political expediency. As such, it was always going to be temporary, especially when the former leader of UKIP and the Brexit Party, Nigel Farage, and his allies in the media were in the process of opening a new post-Brexit front in the culture wars around net zero targets designed to oppose action on the climate emergency. Sure enough, at the Tory Party's 2022 spring conference, the war in Ukraine was positioned as necessitating an end to criticism of British history and debates about statues: "We don't need to be woke, we just want to be free," then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared in his keynote speech (2022). Indeed, prior to his resignation as PM that July over Partygate and his handling of an accusation of groping leveled at the Conservative Deputy Chief Whip Chris Pincher, Johnson's Downing Street campaign staff were preparing to

run a general election campaign that would strongly emphasize culture wars issues. The contest between Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss to replace Johnson certainly did. Sunak used the opportunity to attack "woke nonsense" and "left-wing agitators," accusing them of "rewriting the English language so we can't even use words like 'man,' 'woman' or 'mother' without being told we're offending someone" (Sunak, quoted in Scott 2022).

Why was a right-wing GB News presenter and internet provocateur like Farage keen to contribute to the culture wars, even when he was not then a member of Parliament himself? Partly because doing so was seen as helping to shift the Overton window, what is considered politically acceptable, sensible, impartial, balanced, yet another notch or two to the right. It's a strategy that, over the years, has led to many of Farage's hardline positions being adopted by the Tories and government. Witness Sunak's climbdown over Johnson's net zero commitments. The same rationale could be detected behind the *Daily Mail*'s dismissal as "snowflakes" those alarmed by the extremely high temperatures recorded over the summer of 2022. It was also evident in the pressure placed on the BBC by Conservative politicians and the right-wing press to take the *Match of the Day* presenter Gary Lineker off-air in March 2023. Lineker had used his hugely popular Twitter account to criticize the Sunak government's "immeasurably cruel" illegal migration bill, with its focus on detaining and deporting within weeks refugees crossing the Channel in small boats.[2]

This repositioning of political neutrality was another of the advantages of the culture wars for Conservatives. It is a strategy that also paid off for Farage himself. The Brexit party was renamed Reform UK in January 2020 and led by Farage until early 2021. He then reassumed leadership of the populist Reform during the run-up to the 2024 general election, finally being elected as an MP on his eighth attempt, his party garnering 14% of the vote. (Reform UK went on to win control of ten councils in the May 2025 local elections at the expense of both the Labour and Conservative parties, a success Farage claimed signaled "the end of two-party politics.")[3]

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[2] At the time, Lineker had likened the language of then-Home Secretary Suella Braverman to that of 1930s Germany. He was taken off-air, though only temporarily. It is ironic, then, that his thirty-year relationship with the BBC ultimately came to an end in May 2025 after he reposted a pro-Palestine video on Instagram that included an emoji of a rat, a symbol widely used by the Nazis in the 1930s as a derogatory code for Jewish people. Lineker subsequently acknowledged the image carried "awful" antisemitic connotations.

[3] That many of Farage and Reform's illiberal positions are being adopted by Labour in turn is evident from Party leader and Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's May 2025 claim that "uncontrolled" migration has done "incalculable damage" to British society, which he

Further evidence of a general drift rightward throughout this period was provided by the Department for Education's introduction in 2022 of new rules concerning the teaching of racism, imperialism, and the climate emergency in England's schools designed to ensure political impartiality; and by Sunak's February 2024 framing of those peacefully protesting Israel's war in Gaza as evidence that "mob rule is replacing democratic rule." But the culture wars also worked to create an environment in which it was acceptable for the government at the time to reduce the amount of support it provided to those sectors that were liable to be critical, both of its socially conservative politics (regarding Muslims, immigration, asylum, secrecy laws, the climate crisis, trans rights, the right to protest, and so forth), and of democratic capitalism's constitutive inequalities (in terms of class, race, gender, sexuality, physical ability, etc.). Public, local government, and business investment all having fallen by over a third since the financial crash of 2008 and the subsequent introduction of austerity measures, many arts organizations were thus left struggling to survive both during and after the pandemic due to a lack of a public funding package (National Campaign for the Arts 2020).[4]

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warned risks "becoming an island of strangers" (Starmer 2025). The previous month his government issued advice that trans people should not be permitted to use toilets corresponding to the gender they identify as. This followed an earlier April 16 UK Supreme Court ruling that the terms "woman" and "sex" in the Equality Act legally refer to a biological woman and biological sex—an interpretation reflected in subsequent guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission. This decision marked a departure from Starmer's earlier position that "trans women are women." Meanwhile, whereas farmers have blocked roads with little consequence, climate protestors have been arrested for doing so, with Labour Home Secretary Yvette Cooper even proscribing the protest group Palestine Action under the Terrorism Act 2000.

[4] The UK's arts funding has traditionally operated on a mixed economic model, occupying a position somewhere between that of the US, which relies heavily on private philanthropy, and European countries such as France and Germany, where the arts benefit from substantial public support. The reduction in funding since 2008, however, can also be seen as a form of privatization by stealth. It has forced arts organizations to become much more commercial and entrepreneurial in their operation. Many public galleries and museums now include cafes, restaurants, and gift shops; hire themselves out for events like conferences, weddings, and fashion shows; and run slick fundraising operations designed to attract financial support and sponsorship from corporate bodies, philanthropic organizations, universities, and charitable trusts.

The Private Investment in Culture Survey 2022 report from Arts Council England examined investment from individuals, trusts, foundations, and businesses in the arts and culture over the period of 2018–2019 to 2020–2021. Rather than growing, it found annual private investment had remained at much the same level over the course of these three years. In 2020–2021 it was £799.8 million, compared to the Arts Council's own grant-in-aid budget of £341 million. Of that, £327.8 million (or 44%) came from individuals, £309.3 million (41%) from trusts and foundations, and £116 million (15%) from corporations in

That isn't to say the Conservatives couldn't still get things badly wrong, even in their own eyes. A 2020 government-backed advertising campaign encouraging ballerinas to retrain for jobs in cybersecurity had to be quickly withdrawn after it generated a barrage of protests. Nor was the antagonism toward those areas of society perceived as fostering critical thought and dissent confined to the arts, heritage, and media sectors. It is more than a decade since Michael Gove, as education secretary, excluded the creative arts from the core school curriculum. Countless state institutions have subsequently either downgraded or scrapped their art, music, and theater programs, with the result that the number of young people pursuing arts subjects at GCSE level in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland has decreased by 47% since 2010 (Campaign for the Arts 2023). At the same time, well-off private schools have been able to invest in substantial arts facilities so their alumni can continue to lead the field. Research reveals 35% of Bafta-nominated actors attended a private school, making them five times more likely to have done so than the rest of the UK population (Holt-White et al. 2024, 8).

Yet if the Tories were not committed to protecting the creative industries, they *were* in favor of introducing the teaching of Latin. In 2021 the Department for Education announced a £4 million scheme to do just that, with a plan to roll it out across forty schools as part of a four-year pilot program for eleven- to sixteen-year-olds. It's an idea that appeared to return us to an era when, as Richard Beard shows in *Sad Little Men: Private Schools and the Ruin of England*, his book about the institutions that shaped both Conservative Prime Ministers David Cameron and Boris Johnson, Britain's private schools were quite explicit in placing greater emphasis on the "development of character" than on the "acquisition of knowledge" (G. A. Walters, Headmaster of Pinewood School, quoted in Beard 2021a). (Pupils continued to encounter this approach to education when they left school and became undergraduates at Oxbridge. In *Chums*, a volume about how the Cameron/Johnson generation rose to power, the journalist Simon Kuper writes about his Oxford humanities degree and the tutorial system there preparing him "to write and speak for a living without much knowledge" [2022].)[5] Traditionally, such schools taught very

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the form of donations and memberships. But that was not the case for every arts organization. In a pattern that will become all too familiar, 65% of private investment went to London-based organizations, with 85% going to the "'top 50' recipients" (Arts Council England 2022). The picture is further complicated by the fact that moral and ethical questions are increasingly being raised for private sponsorship, as exemplified by the protests against arts funding from the oil and gas company BP and the investment managers Baillie Gifford.

[5] Another journalist, Nathalie Olah, has gone so far as to describe Oxford as "one of the

little history, geography, or even science, focusing more on sport to exhaust and distract their pupils so they wouldn't be tempted to have sex with one another.[6] "Compliance was more important than critical thinking," writes Beard. When it came to academic subjects, these schools concentrated mainly on the classics and religion. Along with their nostalgic instinct to "hide in a glorified"—and often fictitious—past, evident right down to their "almost accurate historical costumes" (Beard 2021a), and associated aversion to new ideas and to difficulty and complexity, this goes a long way toward explaining why so much culture in England in particular has tended to be rather safe, homogenous, and anti-intellectual.

The withdrawal of support from critical and creative subjects by successive Conservative governments has also had (and is continuing to have) an impact on universities—especially on what courses are available for students to take at which institutions. Again, an arts and humanities education has been able to continue in some form at least at the kind of globally recognized brand-name institution that accepts a lot of private school pupils but is less successful in admitting those from non-traditional and under-resourced backgrounds, in a manner it has not been able to do so quite as easily at others. As a result, between 2009–2010 and 2019–2020, the number of university students enrolled in humanities courses in the UK declined by 18% (Roberts 2021), with only 38% of the 2021–2022 cohort taking at least one humanities course, compared to nearly 60% from 2003–2004 to 2015–2016 (Scott et al.

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most culturally barren places I have ever encountered." Her experience of attending Oxford was that:

> For the privately educated, university seemed less an exercise in wanting to genuinely understand the world around them and more an endless game of debate and one-upmanship, where the final goal wasn't to establish truths or to find solutions to any given problem, but to simply win. In this game, reading materials were no longer entry points or ways of thinking about a given subject, but provided a stock of quotations used as collateral in arguments whose basis never extended beyond the person's own biases and judgements. Rewards were given to those who spoke most persuasively, who had the greatest command and confidence in their delivery, and who, I quickly realised, were able to most successfully mimic the styles that were peddled in the House of Commons and, increasingly, the mainstream media. (2019, 109)

[6] In 2024, the departing chancellor of Oxford University, Chris Pattern, acknowledged that the university produced "bullshitters."

This point is made by Verkaik (2018, 36). Beard provides another reason for the concern these schools have with diverting their pupils away from sex: "Post-colonial historians look at 'sublimating' as an animating force behind Empire-building, so that public school Englishmen, less distracted by sex than other Europeans, repurposed their frustration by conquering foreign lands" (2021a).

2024, 8).[7] There is little doubt that George Osborne's 2015–2016 decision, as chancellor of the exchequer in the Cameron government, to lift the cap on student numbers had a significant impact in this regard. It made it possible for so-called "prestigious," high tariff institutions to admit as many students as they wished. This increase in enrollment (but not necessarily in staffing levels) has left their arts and humanities "classroom" courses—which, because they are relatively inexpensive to teach and simple to grow, can be used to subsidize areas of provision that aren't so popular with undergraduates—somewhat cumbersome to organize, leading to a reduction in the quality of the student experience. At the same time, Osborne's policy, combined with high inflation, frozen tuition fees, and falling levels of international student recruitment due to Brexit and the tightening of visa regulations, has created serious challenges for those lower profile institutions that *are* good at recruiting from non-traditional backgrounds. Many are now struggling to enroll students in sufficient numbers to keep their arts and humanities courses viable. (Annual statistics on young people's participation in higher education, released by the Department for Education in October 2024, showed that the proportion of disadvantaged teenagers going on to study at university by the age of nineteen had declined for the first time in the academic year 2022–2023. While selective universities had raised their intake of A-level students to 38%, this increase was outpaced by an even sharper rise in the proportion of private school students, who were almost twice as likely as state school students to secure places at these institutions [Department for Education 2024].) Looking ahead, a future beckons where an (inferior) arts and humanities education will be available only at a small number of "top universities." As it is, over half of the creative students at four such institutions—Oxford, Cambridge, Bath, and King's College London—are currently from upper-middle-class backgrounds. Meanwhile, Cambridge (4%), Oxford (5%), Bath (4%), and Bristol (5%) have the lowest percentages of students with working-class origins studying creative subjects (Holt-White et al. 2024, 5).

This introduction almost by stealth of a two-tier system of higher education has been aided and abetted by the lack of maintenance support for students. Along with the cost-of-living crisis, it has left more than half of undergraduates having to work nearly two-days a week in paid employment

[7] That degrees in these areas are not attractive to employers could also be a factor in this decline. Yet contrary to common belief, many organizations *do* value the arts and humanities. Research carried out by the British Academy in 2017 found that, of FTSE 100 index company CEOs, 58% had studied arts, humanities, or social sciences (British Academy 2017).

while still supposedly studying full-time. The result is an increasing divide. On the one side are those students from under-resourced backgrounds who need to work to survive and to be able to study, but who then have less time to actually attend lectures and seminars. On the other are their more privileged peers who can still afford to have the "traditional university experience" of studying full-time away from home. As Nick Hillman, director of HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute) writes when commenting on the results of the 2024 *HEPI / Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey*, they are the ones who "have enough energy to become steeped in extra-curricular activities" of the kind that enhance CVs, "enough money to consider unpaid internships" capable of launching careers, in the creative industries especially, "and enough time to follow a sensible work-life balance" (Hillman 2024).

I say *almost by stealth*, but in fact universities have been an explicit target in the culture wars: for their supposed left-wing campus politics, "no platforming," and "cancel culture." (The latter two terms refer, respectively, to university students preventing someone with what are held to be unacceptable views from taking part in public debate; and to the boycotting of certain individuals, organizations, or groups because of their perceived misconduct.) At the Conservative Party conference of October 2022, one backbench MP went so far as to argue that the numbers of young people admitted to university should be restricted to prevent more of them from being subjected to such left-liberal indoctrination. The following year, the right-wing think tank Civitas even produced a document ranking UK universities in terms of their "radical progressivism." Institutions were rated negatively if they had "anti-racism training" and made references to "white privilege" or "trigger warnings" that provide notice of potentially distressing material (Norrie 2023). (The US version of this targeting of universities saw J.D. Vance echoing Richard Nixon's infamous line that "the professors are the enemy" in a 2021 keynote speech at the National Conservatism Conference. "[W]e have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities," the future vice president in the second Donald Trump administration insisted [2021].) What's more, higher ed institutions were a target for such aggression despite research showing there was "not a great deal of awareness or particular focus among the UK public about universities being in the front line" of the culture wars, or of being particularly left-wing (Duffy, quoted in Morgan 2021). Indeed, by late 2023 it was found that over half of the UK population (52%) considered the culture wars to be a "serious problem for UK society and politics, an increase on the 43% who said the same" in 2020 (Duffy et al. 2023).

Within this there was open government hostility toward the arts and humanities due to their assumed teaching of "cultural Marxism" and critical race theory, and "low-value" and "dead-end" degree courses. (Again, this hostility was in spite—or was it because—of the fact that, across the West, younger people today are actually quite radical and left-wing [Niemietz 2021]. Millennials are the first generation not to have become significantly more right-wing as they have grown older. Instead, they have tended to maintain the progressive social values and backing for minority rights they share with the subsequent generation, Gen Z—with the notable exception of those teenage boys and men who follow Jordan Peterson, Andrew Tate, and their misogynistic ilk, of course. Thus the 2021 British Social Attitudes survey found that a majority of the public support "woke" liberal positions on culture wars issues such as sexual identity, the impact of immigration on the economy, and equal rights for Black and Asian people [Curtice et al. 2022]. It is because of the long-term existential threat such social attitudes pose to the Conservative Party that Michael Gove, then secretary of state for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities, branded them as evidence a new liberal elite of "radical social change activists" was in the process of taking control of Britain's institutions—rather than as an indication that the Conservatives themselves needed to change [Gove 2023]. What's more, it's a view very much shared by Sunak's successor as leader of the party, Kemi Badenoch, for whom pronouns, DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] programs, and climate activism are a "poison" that threatens Western civilization.) Just as many cultural venues and organizations suffered from a lack of financial aid during the pandemic, so the arts and humanities were now being deliberately defunded because they were not considered "strategic priorities." According to the University and College Union, a trade union for academic and professional services staff in UK universities, the cuts halved the "amount of money available for creative and arts subjects" from the beginning of the 2021–2022 academic year. Such reforms were all "part of government plans to prioritise funding for 'high-value' courses like STEM and medicine" (UCU 2021). So, too, was Sunak's subsequent plan to cap the numbers of students on "rip-off degrees," defined as those that don't have large percentages of graduates launching a business, going into the professions, or proceeding to postgraduate study (Department for Education 2023).

Many institutions reacted by reducing their arts and humanities provision, with some staff let go and others subjected to fire-and-rehire practices that left

them on worse contracts. Among them were Roehampton, Wolverhampton, Leicester, Dundee, Huddersfield, Goldsmiths, Portsmouth, Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam, Birkbeck, and Kent. Notably, these cuts affected primarily the so-called "plate glass" and "post-92" (i.e., ex-polytechnic) universities rather than Oxbridge or even the Russell Group, whose wealth and privilege tend to insulate them and their students from market fluctuations and changes in government funding. This disparity highlights how such policies, and the restructurings that accompany them, are shaped by the underlying class dynamics.[8] In the US, by contrast, it is wealthy elite institutions such as Columbia and Harvard that have been the target of the second Trump administration and its policies. They have been denounced as supposed strongholds of campus antisemitism and the *woke radical left*, largely *because* of their immense power and privilege, which enables them to act as a bulwark against authoritarianism. Class dynamics are at play here, too, since this framing also allows Trump to appeal to his base, which consists to a significant extent of working-class White men without college educations.

Courses that tackle racial inequalities in UK higher education have also been significantly affected, with many closed and those teaching on them made redundant. Yet all this still wasn't enough to stop the last government's Secretary of State for Education Gillian Keegan from announcing further cuts. In April 2024 she instructed the Office for Students to freeze funding designed to cover the additional expenses associated with teaching undergraduate courses in the performing and creative arts for the 2024–2025 financial year, and to discontinue such top-up grants altogether for postgraduate instruction in those subjects (Keegan 2024).

[8] *Defund Culture* focuses on Oxford and Cambridge because they and their alumni dominate so much of culture in the UK. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the kind of less-well-known universities where I myself have worked. It was these institutions that led the mass expansion of UK higher education from the 1990s onwards, opening access to university for a far wider and more diverse range of students. They were also at the forefront of championing disciplines such as media studies, cultural studies, and cultural theory—fields that are now increasingly being framed as problematic from both an instrumental and ideological standpoint.

CHAPTER TWO

Culture Must Be ~~Defended~~ Defunded

Very often the response of those on the left and liberals alike when faced by attacks on the arts and culture is to argue that they *should* be publicly funded, and to an increasing extent, not least because Britain's creative industries are such a success economically and in terms of soft power. A House of Lords committee reported in 2023 that they contribute £115.9 billion to the economy, which is more than the automotive, life sciences, and aerospace industries combined (House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee 2023). In fact, they are second in this respect only to the country's financial services. With 2.3 million jobs—6.9% of the total number—in the creative industries, they are also one of the nation's largest employers (Creative Industries Council 2022). Clearly, when they are attacked it is for reasons other than economics. "We are in crisis mode," Nicholas Hytner, former artistic director of the National Theatre, told the BBC's *Newsnight* program following the spread of the Omicron variant over the winter of 2021–2022. "We need to see short-term finance, we need to see loans, we need to see VAT looked at again, we need to see business rates looked at again" (Hytner, quoted in Dunne 2021). It's the kind of default response that has led to initiatives such as the Public Campaign for the Arts. Established in 2020, initially "to protect UK culture from the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic," it quickly became the nation's largest arts advocacy organiza-

tion, its mission being "to champion the value of the arts and creativity in the UK" (Public Campaign for the Arts 2022).[1]

With Birmingham city council having declared it was effectively bankrupt in 2023 due to a significant shortfall in government funding, and announcing plans to cut all financial backing for local cultural organizations over the coming years—and with numerous other councils being in a similar situation—calls for increased investment in the arts will no doubt only intensify following Labour's victory in the July 2024 general election. For what might be considered a preliminary example, a manifesto demanding radical action was issued by Creative UK in April 2024. It asked for: the restoration of the arts' share of National Lottery funding to its original 25%; the provision of financial security for creatives in the age of artificial intelligence through the maintenance and enforcement of the UK's "gold-standard" intellectual property and copyright regime; and the establishment of a Creativity Bank to secure increased private and philanthropic investment (Creative UK 2024). Meanwhile, in September of the same year, over four thousand artists, curators, gallerists, and arts professionals signed an open letter to Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy, urging the government to appoint a freelancer commissioner to represent the rights and interests of freelancers in the visual arts industry. They also called for the establishment of a Smart Fund to support visual artists in response to budget cuts, studio shutdowns, and the growing influence of generative AI. Backed by the Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACS) and the Contemporary Visual Arts Network, this fund would be financed through a levy on the sales of smartphones, computers, and tablets (Zimmermann et al. 2024). (It's worth noting the emphasis placed on a rather unimaginative understanding of copyright both by these artists and by Creative UK, especially given the role we'll see copyright play below in promoting the liberal values of predominantly well-off, Euro-Western, White, male, middle-class individuals.) And, to be sure, even though public finances are expected to be severely limited for the foreseeable future, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has pledged to review the school curriculum and put creativity at its core, underlining the arts and creative industries as a crucial part of his government's economic growth strategy (2024). As a step in this direction, in February 2025 Nandy announced the establishment of a £270 million Arts Everywhere Fund for England to support those already-

[1] The National Campaign for the Arts and the Public Campaign for the Arts merged in October 2022 to become the Campaign for the Arts. Other initiatives that emerged around this time include the Defend the Arts campaign led by a group associated with the University and College Union.

existing institutions and attractions that are in danger of closing while also enhancing culture in curricula and communities throughout the country.

Yet while I would strongly refute the right's depiction of culture, and of universities, as not worthy of substantial financial support, it's also fair to say that this argument of the left and liberals regarding public funding is aiming at the wrong target. Part of the point of universities, and the arts and humanities especially, is not so much to act as guardians of tradition as to provide spaces where society's accepted, taken-for-granted collective values and beliefs can be examined, interrogated and put to the test. Keeping this interrogation of common-sense certainties in mind, perhaps we can see the defunding of culture that has occurred over recent years, and which is far from confined to the culture wars, somewhat counter-intuitively. Perhaps we can see it not just as threat but also as an opportunity: one that gives us a chance to argue for real transformative change by asking whose—or indeed *what*—culture it is we want to be funded?

Elsewhere I've written about how 39% of the UK's leading people are privately educated (that's more than five times as many as in the general population), with nearly a quarter graduating from Oxford or Cambridge (Hall 2021a, 9; Sutton Trust 2019). It's these predominantly upper- and middle-class individuals who receive most of the financial support for education in the UK. In 2022–2023 the average fee for attending a private school was £15,200. That is 90% more than the per-pupil expenditure at state schools, which stood at £8,000 for the same academic year. (Contrast that with 2009–2010, when the difference between them was only around 40%, amounting to £3,500 [Sibieta 2023].) The majority of this extra money is channeled to London and the southeast of England, which have 3.8 and 3.6 private schools per ten thousand pupils respectively, compared to just 1.2 in the northeast (Department for Education 2018; Henseke et al. 2021).

The upper and middle class also receive the largest proportion of the available support concerning the creative arts. As late as 2017, it was found that half of the country's poets and novelists attended private school and 44% were educated at Oxbridge (Hall 2021a, 11).[2] Yet between just 6% and 7% of the UK population go to a private school and approximately 1% graduate from Oxford or Cambridge (Hall 2021a, 24; HMRC 2024; Sutton Trust 2019). Clearly, not everyone has the same opportunity to contribute to the arts and culture. If you want to be a published literary author, best be in that

[2] The figures are for those appearing in Who's Who and are taken from Solomon (2018) and Reeves and Friedman (2017).

1%. Ideally, that means coming from the southeast of England, because then you have a 35% chance of gaining a place at Cambridge if you apply, compared to just 26% if you live in Wales. (This figure drops to 19% for Welsh students who apply to Oxford [Hall 2021a, 10; Montacute and Cullinane 2018, 12].) It means being upper or middle class economically, too. In 2017 it was also revealed that more than four-fifths of offers to Oxbridge were to the "sons and daughters of people in the two top socio-economic classes," and that the situation was steadily growing worse (Hall 2021a, 10; Lammy 2017).[3] It thus comes as no surprise to find a 2022 Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) survey of sixty thousand writers in the UK indicating that almost 50% are based in London and the south of England. Just 3% live in the northeast, where only 1% have writing as an occupation that takes up at least 50% of their working time (Thomas et al. 2022).

All of which raises the question: Now that Labour is in power, should we call simply for culture to be publicly funded and risk continuing to bestow opportunities and resources primarily on those who have long received the bulk of them, thus reinforcing the existing hierarchies? (Typically, of the £270 million Arts Everywhere Fund announced by Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy, £120 million—almost 45%—has been set aside for seventeen "leading" institutions such as the National Gallery and British Museum.) The evidence is that the current structures and institutions are not functioning for everyone—especially not working-class, Black, and Global Majority people, whose parents largely *do not* belong to the top two socio-economic classes. Over 50% of Black children in the UK are growing up in poverty, according to analysis of government statistics by the Labour Party (Crew 2022). Similarly, the likelihood of Black and minority ethnic people living in relative poverty is 2.5 times higher, and the likelihood of their living in deep poverty (having an income that is more than 50% below the relative poverty line) 2.2 times higher than it is for White people. The latter figure for deep poverty rises to being three times more likely for Bangladeshi people. The most prominent racial disparities are to be found in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Yorkshire and the Humber (Edmiston 2022). (The impact of such disparity was felt strongly in the 2024 general election, where a record number of people—48% of the electorate—did not vote. Participation was focused among the middle classes, homeowners, and those with higher incomes: individuals with economic and political interests in

[3] Further evidence to this effect is provided by Francis Green and David Kynaston (2019). They, too, show that attendance at private school is "concentrated at the very top of the income distribution."

the election outcome. Conversely, turnout fell in places with large ethnic minority populations and among certain social and racial groups, including renters and non-graduates. The difference in turnout between graduates and non-graduates was double that of the 2019 election, while the gap between renters and homeowners was 25% greater in 2024 than it was for the 2017 election [Patel and Swift 2024]. Essentially, those without an economic or political stake were far less likely to vote, rendering the whole process highly unequal. Among those who did vote, 21% of Reform supporters expressed approval of the violent anti-immigration riots and demonstrations that occurred in the UK over the summer of 2024, with their call to "stop the boats" and "take our country back."

Few if any of these events took place in middle-class areas where people own their homes and enjoy highly paid careers [Difford 2024]. Indeed, more than half of those demonstrators who were arrested and charged came from the poorest 20% of neighborhoods [Duncan et al. 2024].) Meanwhile, it's been found that even those who grow up with parents in working-class occupations, and who are thus not necessarily living in either poverty or deep poverty, are four times less likely than those from professional families to be employed in cultural and creative jobs (Brook et al. 2022). No real shock about the class ceiling there either. After all, a 2023 survey of artists employed in the public sector for both major galleries and smaller projects confirmed an average hourly rate of £2.60, far below the UK minimum wage of £9.50, amid a culture of precarious, unpaid, and poorly paid labor and exploitation (Industria 2023). In light of the injustice of the situation, should a certain number of resources and opportunities be disinvested from the cultural sphere as it exists now, which is predominantly upper and middle class and, very often, straight, White, cis-gendered, and male? Should they be strategically transferred to other areas of society instead, with a view to generating art and creativity in the UK that *is* more diverse—and hopefully less boring, tepid, and risk-averse?[4]

[4] In *Glitch Poetics*, Nathan Jones argues that "proto-media-realisms"—by which he means "experimental literature in which authors develop latent media tendencies into a style that captures the essence of mainstream media experience in later generations"—together with "speculations on what media can become, are often responding to the lesser-known, lesser-written challenges and intensities of today's working-class lives. As Fran Lock has observed, 'the social conditions and particular pressured contexts that produce innovation' are more intensely felt by working-class people" (Jones 2022, 186, 185, 186–87). So it may be that working-class people, among others, are well-placed to produce literature that is more interesting and less conformist and conventional.

As well as referring to the Conservative government's withdrawal of public backing for the arts, the title of this book, *Defund Culture*, is of course a respectful homage to the contemporary demand for the defunding of the police. It's a demand that has a long history connected to struggles over class and racial injustice.[5] In the US, Angela Davis and other activists were already calling for the defunding of the police in the 1960s. Davis herself has traced this demand back to at least 1935. That was the year W. E. B. Du Bois published *Black Reconstruction in America*, in which he pushed for the abolition of institutions such as prisons and police forces that he saw as being entrenched in racist beliefs (Du Bois [1935] 1999; Davis, quoted in Goodman 2020). It was the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, following the deaths of Breonna Taylor (March 13), George Floyd (May 25), Tony McDade (May 27), and many others, which brought the call for the police to be defunded to renewed prominence in the US and to a lesser extent in the UK. This demand was given further impetus in the latter by several events that took place in 2021. They include the conviction of Wayne Couzens—a serving officer nicknamed "The Rapist" by some of his earlier colleagues in the force "as a joke"—for luring Sarah Everard into his car using his police credentials, and kidnapping, raping, and killing her. The police then used force to break up a vigil for Everard on the grounds that it was an illegal gathering under the coronavirus lockdown regulations in operation at the time. (This response on the police's part was later deemed to have breached "fundamental rights" by both a parliamentary inquiry and a 2022 high court ruling.) There was also the guilty verdict passed on another officer, Mark Kennedy, for having an exploitative long-term relationship with an environmental and social justice activist while undercover; and the arrest and eventual jailing of Jamie Lewis and Deniz Jaffer, a pair of constables who took "inappropriate photographs" of murdered sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, and then shared them in two WhatsApp groups. Nor were such events confined to 2021. Most notably, in 2023 David Carrick—nickname: "Bastard Dave"—was found guilty of having abused his position as an officer with the Metropolitan police to commit forty-two rapes over two decades; while the Casey report of that year found the Met to be (still) institutionally racist, homophobic, and misogynistic.[6]

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[5] A first version of the argument of this book was presented at the Radical Open Access: Experiments in (Post-)Publishing Symposium, organized by Mark Amerika and Janneke Adema, and held at the University of Colorado at Boulder on October 1, 2021—also the start of Black History Month in the UK.

[6] For more on abolition politics and the call to defund the police in Britain specifically, see

As has often been said, #DefundThePolice does not necessarily mean abolishing all law enforcement—although it's sometimes interpreted that way, especially by its opponents, including that powerful minority for whom the role of police is to protect their property and interests. Instead, what this demand is most commonly taken to mean is that if forces are not serving their communities, and are rather harming large sections of them, including women, working-class people, and people of color, their sizes should be reduced. At least some of the public money the police receive to ensure *everyone's* safety and security should then be transferred to other sections of society—local residents, voluntary organizations, citizens groups, and so forth—to provide community help and resources in different ways. There's a recognition, too, that the police today are required to deal with a great number of problems they are not properly trained for and are better handled by others. So Defund the Police can likewise mean de-bundling many of their responsibilities and redistributing them to educators, drug clinicians, and mental health specialists, instead of requiring officers to act as everything from social workers and peace negotiators to ambulance crew. (In the US especially, Defund the Police can also refer to their demilitarization—even more relevant following Trump's June 2025 deployment of the National Guard and Marines as militarized law enforcement to quell protests in Los Angeles over Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrests.) That said, for some scholars and activists, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017), Mariame Kaba (2020), and Angela Davis (Davis et al. 2022) among them, defunding the police is undoubtedly about striving for a police-free future. It's about forces being fully disinvested and disbanded and cities being without police and even policing (which is not the same as their being without help, public safety, or first responders). No matter how it's interpreted, though, Defund the Police is concerned with taking a new, decriminalizing approach to law enforcement, rather than privatizing it or reforming it by punishing a few individuals as bad apples. The idea is to present a radical vision of the future in which the structural and systemic issues that lead to crime, such as social and economic inequality, poverty, and homelessness, are addressed in a fashion that offers life-giving alternatives to the carceral logic of the prison-industrial complex.

Granted, the call to Defund the Police is frequently rejected as unrealistic as well as threatening. Indeed, the association with #DefundThePolice is one of the reasons Black Lives Matter has often been condemned as Marxist and

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Day and McBean (2022), and Northern Police Monitoring Project et al. (2023).

extremist, even though as a horizontal and decentralized movement it does not have just one politics. Most obviously, in the UK, in respect of culture, it is this association that has led politicians and some fans to criticize football players for taking the knee, as this anti-racist gesture is perceived as having politically radical overtones. Yet Defund the Police is a philosophy that is backed up by the available research, much of which is captured in Alex Vitale's *The End of Policing* (2017)—to the extent that, as Howard Henderson and Ben Yisrael (2021) point out, at least thirteen cities in the United States have engaged in policies designed to defund the police. Similarly, in an article on how it was Elinor Ostrom's inquiries into defunding the police that led to her Nobel Prize–winning work on the commons—that is, on how people can manage and share resources in their community—Aaron Vansintjan (2020) notes how "Indigenous Peoples continue to practice safety without the police, such as a community in Whitehorse, Canada. Indigenous citizens of Chéran, Mexico 'threw out' the police and took safety into their own hands. There is now little crime that was otherwise common in this part of Mexico."

Can an equally radical vision of the future be presented regarding culture in the UK? As with the call to defund the police, until culture is *by* and *for* all of society (however that pluriversality is understood), and not primarily private school and Oxbridge-educated White people from the southeast of England, should we demand that it, too, be defunded—with some institutions even abolished—and the responsibilities for participating in, managing, and sharing culture rethought and redistributed?

This book is intended more as a speculative proposal than a full-blown economic plan. Yet there are a number of ways of funding a more radical redistribution of opportunities and resources that it might be worth exploring as starting points (beyond obvious ideas like reallocating that public money currently directed toward the royal family). Here are just three:

1. Defunding private education by removing the public subsidies and charitable status of private schools and reallocating their endowments, investments, and properties with a view to gradually abolishing these establishments. (A number of such schools, including Eton, have been found to have received substantial financial donations and endowments from individuals connected to the slave trade and slave labor during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.)

   A private education being predominantly chosen by families in the top percentage of earners—today the 5% with incomes of £120,000 or more—the

policy of abolishing private schools featured in the 1979 Labour Party Manifesto and was approved by the Labour Party conference in 2019. Revoking the charitable status of these schools, ending their business rates relief and making them pay VAT on fees—their exemption from doing so being valued at £1.7 billion—was initially part of Starmer's plans should a Labour government be elected. The intention was to use the money accrued to pay for teachers for the 94% educated in the state sector, resulting in smaller class sizes and the return to a broader range of subjects. (Of that 94%, 96% of families in Scotland don't send their children to private schools while the figure rises to 98% in Wales. In London, however, it falls to 87%.) Since then, while Labour has applied VAT from January 2025 and has removed their business rates benefits from April 2025, it has nevertheless rowed back on ending the charitable status of private schools.

2. Defunding London and the southeast by ensuring that a disproportionate share of financial support—whether it comes directly from the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) or via Arts Council England (ACE), a non-departmental public body of the DCMS—no longer continues to go to London and institutions like the National Gallery, Tate, and V&A (all of which also benefited historically from slavery). An analysis of data for as late as 2018–2019 revealed that London attracted around a third of ACE investment. That equates to £24 per person, with other regions receiving only £8 (Redmond 2019; Stark 2013).
One call for a change to this policy came from the Northern Culture All Party Parliamentary Group Levelling-up Inquiry in the form of the 2022 report, *The Case for Culture: What Northern Culture Needs to Rebuild, Rebalance and Recover* (Shaw 2022). Another issued, infamously, from Dowden's successor as secretary of state for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Nadine Dorries. In 2022 Dorries instructed £24 million to be taken out of the Arts Council budget for London annually by 2024–2025 and for the funding to be redistributed to other parts of the country: "nowhere near enough to transform the picture in the rest of the country, but enough to devastate English National Opera, among many others," as Nicolas Hytner put it (2023, 4). More recently, numerous leaders in the sector have warned of cultural wastelands developing around the country as their organizations now face additional hurdles. These include not just rising business expenses and energy costs, but also those increases to the National Living Wage and employer National Insurance contributions that were announced in Labour's October 2024 budget by Chancellor Rachel Reeves.

3. Defunding Oxbridge, since as we have seen, it, too, is not working for all of society. (In 2018 the combined wealth of Oxford and Cambridge universities was reported to be £21 billion.) Money could then be redirected to encourage projects such as the attempt of Cambridge PhD student Melz Owusu to set up the Free Black University in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests. The idea of this project is to decolonize higher education by redistributing knowledge and funding, and putting Black students and staff at its center, along with a radically reconceived university structure, curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment system. As Owusu recounted at the time: "I was like, hmm, this idea of transforming the university from the inside and having a decolonized curriculum isn't going to happen with the way the structures of the university are." Many universities are "built on colonization—the money, buildings, architecture—everything is colonial" (Owusu, quoted in Swain 2020).[7]

I should stress, this is not to propose abolishing Oxbridge, or traditional universities, or indeed all liberal cultural institutions. Instead, I want to go beyond modernist-left liberal discourses to advocate a radically pluralized politics that is capable of including the modernist-left, the liberal, and the pluriversal at the same time.[8] From this point of view, the defunding of Oxbridge and redistribution of funding and resources has the potential to include more support being given to some of those less prestigious universities in different parts of the UK that are not quite so deeply shaped by the inherited standards and structures of privately-educated upper- and middle-class White people from the southeast of England. There are those who do propose abolishing the traditional university, however, as well as the police and prisons. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, for example, write that the left slogan "'universities, not jails,' marks a choice that may not be possible. . . . perhaps more universities promote more jails. Perhaps it is necessary finally to see that the university produces incarceration as the product of its negligence. Perhaps there is another relation between the University and

[7] More on The Free Black University, its mission, story, and current status—as of the beginning of 2024, it is on temporary pause as a result of the unfavorable funding landscape—is available at https://www.freeblackuni.com/; for more on the demand to fund such projects, see Turner (2018) and the call to Fund Black Futures of Black Youth Project 100 (https://www.byp100.org/).

[8] To be clear, *modern* and *modernist* are being used here to refer to the ontological separation between human and nonhuman, subject and object, reason and emotion, mind and body, masculine and feminine, culture and nature, living and non-living. See Hall (2021b), Escobar (2020), and Lugones (2010).

> the Prison—beyond simple opposition or family resemblance—that . . . of another abolitionism" (2013, 41; see also Boggs et al. 2021).[9]

Not so long ago, the following question might have seemed clichéd. (It may still do.) But, I wonder, does the ongoing impact of the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic and its aftermath continue to offer us a chance to present a radically different vision of what the future of society could look like and how we might make it happen?[10] Such a transformative change would undoubtedly be disruptive of the status quo. Yet with respect to culture, and much else besides, the coronavirus has already been disruptive of the status quo, albeit in ways that have often served the interests of the political right and their allies in business and the media. Moreover, as the Conservative Party's response to the COVID-19 crisis showed (which is another reason I'm raising the subject of the coronavirus in this context), we *can* make transformations in our priorities today that previously would have been considered unthinkable. Ideas about big state intervention in social life that might once have been dismissed as Marxist or socialist were suddenly the only thing that could save us. Between February 2020 and July 2021 alone, the UK Government devoted a total of £370 billion to dealing with the pandemic and its economic impact. (A further comparison is offered by France, which in the wake of the COVID-19 health emergency increased its cultural budget by 7.5% to a new record total of £3.86 billion. By contrast, Arts Council England announced plans to allocate an annual budget of just £458.5 million right up until 2026, with the majority of the country's largest ACE-subsidized cultural institutions already reporting as running at a loss as early as their end-of-year accounts for 2023.) Not to introduce profound changes in the financing of art and culture is therefore clearly a political decision, not a pragmatic one.

In arguing for the defunding of culture, there's a danger of building a case that could easily appear to lead to a further stifling of critique of the Government, authoritarian nationalism, or the free market by undermining liberal institutions such as the National Theatre and the National Trust. And even more so given the Barbican Centre and Donmar Warehouse Theatre are among those London-based organizations that have already lost their Arts

[9] Moten and Harney (2020) have since finessed their ideas about the relation between the university and abolitionism (and about critical intellectuals "being present in a different way" by practicing an alternative radical complicity with the institution in the form of shared practice rather than individual roles).

[10] At one stage both the BBC (2020) and *Guardian* newspaper (GNM Press Office 2021) launched major series, titled *Rethink* and *Reconstruction After Covid*, respectively, to explore how society should change in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

Council funding for 2023–2026 following the Conservative government's directive for ACE to spend more money outside of London as part of its "levelling-up" scheme. Yet the likes of the latter diktat, #DefundtheBBC, and the proposal to axe the corporation's license fee, all of which have issued from the right in recent years, are not the only alternatives to advocating for financial assistance to be given to those social and cultural elites who have long received the lion's share of it.[11] The creative industries can be taken in a very different direction to *all* of this. It may seem a strange thing to say at a time when liberal democracy is under violent attack in many parts of the world, including from both populist authoritarianism and anti-liberalism. Indeed, with its assault on European democracy and cozying up to Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump's second presidency is perceived by many as heralding the collapse of the transatlantic alliance, and with it the end of the postwar liberal world order—even the "West" as a unified entity. It's *precisely because liberal democracy is under such attack*, however, that we need to make this argument—and need to do so now, since the *undermining* of certain liberal institutions (rather than the more usual left-liberal approach of protecting or reforming them) is what is required if we want to reconstruct a better world after Brexit, the COVID-19 contagion, the second coming of Trump, and wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, and Iran. This means demanding a world in which it is *not* private school and Oxbridge-educated straight White cis people from London and the southeast who receive the vast majority of support in the UK with regard to participating in art and culture, while others in society are exploited, marginalized, and silenced.

[11] For a discussion of #DefundtheBBC, see Barnett and Specht (2020). Since 2020 the BBC has had its funding cut by over 30% in real terms. This has led to major reductions being made to its local radio output in 2023, to take just one example. It is worth noting that this is taking place against the backdrop of 320 local newspaper closures across the UK between 2009 and 2019. Meta, meanwhile, has followed Twitter/X in ending rigorous fact-checking on its Facebook, Instagram, and Threads platforms. As a result, many communities now lack access to reliable grassroots news and reporting—leaving space for alternative facts and provocations to fill the gap.

The idea of cutting the BBC's license fee altogether was also put forward by Dorries when she was culture secretary. While she didn't succeed, she did manage to freeze it, resulting in a predicted £400 million shortfall in funding for the BBC by 2027. And, of course, it was Dorries's decree that Arts Council England funding should be moved out of London that led to the 2023–2026 settlement which cuts £50 million a year from the capital's arts organizations. Hence the defunding of the Barbican and Donmar.

CHAPTER THREE

Culture in Ruins: "Are We the Bad Guys?"

The changes I'm pointing to go much further than giving more people from a wider range of backgrounds the kind of opportunities that might enable them to contribute to art and culture. This is why my work in this area is not simply about social mobility or widening access. The problem is, in all the debates on these topics, not enough attention is given to the damage that is done to the nation's cultural landscape by a situation in which 39% of the UK's leading people are privately educated, with a quarter graduating from Oxford or Cambridge.

Many writers have come to appreciate how this state of affairs harms society in political and psychological terms. In *Sad Little Men*, Beard refers to the work of the psychoanalyst Joy Schaverien and her 2015 volume *Boarding School Syndrome*. Schaverien describes a condition that, in Beard's words, is:

> now sufficiently recognised to merit therapy groups and an emergent academic literature in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*. The symptoms are wide-ranging but include, engrained from an early age, emotional detachment and dissociation, cynicism, exceptionalism, defensive arrogance, offensive arrogance, cliquism, compartmentalisation, guilt, grief, denial, strategic emotional misdirection and stiff-lipped stoicism. (Beard 2021a)

In this environment, Beard continues, pupils survived by drastically modifying their behavior and emotions: "Abandoned, alone, England's future

leaders needed to fit in whatever the cost. . . . Terrified of crying for help, of complaining or sneaking, we developed a gangster loyalty to self-contained cliques, scared to death of being cast out, of being cast out again, as we had been from home" (2021a). Beard proceeds to argue that, in its impact on his generation of boarding-school boys, evidence of this condition can be seen in the UK Government's handling of Brexit and—as was subsequently confirmed by the official COVID-19 inquiry in 2023—the pandemic (2021b). (Indeed, as well as bringing the nation together as an imagined community, hostility to the European Union and desire to Get Brexit Done, in the words of Johnson's 2019 election campaign, also served to unify the Conservative Party itself. Once Britain formally left the EU, and gained some measure of control over the coronavirus, not even the culture wars were able to prevent the party from disintegrating into in-fighting between different factions, including the so-called "five families": the New Conservatives, the European Research Group, the Common Sense Group, No Turning Back, and the Northern Research Group.)

The historian and journalist Charles Spencer, the ninth Earl Spencer, makes a similar case to Beard in *A Very Private School: A Memoir*: "It's a fact that many of the leading figures in British public life today—from prime ministers to royalty—have received just such a private, boarding school education," he writes. "While some thrived under benevolent headteachers, others have been wounded by wretched treatment during formative years . . . . Some of that poisonous legacy they have unwittingly passed on to society" (Spencer 2024). (Significantly, Farage was privately educated—in his case at Dulwich College.)

So, too, does author and musician Musa Okwonga. In *One of Them*, his memoir about his time as a schoolboy at Eton (also the alma mater of Earl Spencer, David Cameron, Boris Johnson, and Truss's short-serving chancellor of the exchequer, Kwasi Kwarteng), he notes that:

> A few years before I arrived at my school, it was attended by a cluster of people who now hold political office in Britain: a group who has driven through some of the most socially regressive policies in recent memory, and whose leader, the current prime minister, is best known for his arrogance and dishonesty. . . . I ask myself whether this was my school's ethos: to win at all costs; to be reckless, at best, and brutal, at worst. I look at its motto again—"May Eton Flourish"—and I think, yes, many of our politicians have flourished, but to the vast detriment of others. Maybe we were raised to be the bad guys? (Okwonga 2021) [1]

[1] Speaking of bad guys, Helen Roche (2021) has shown how British public schools such as

It's a question worth keeping in mind, especially considering that, of the eighteen UK prime ministers since 1945, five went to Eton. A total of fourteen prime ministers attended the University of Cambridge—six of them Trinity College—while twenty-eight studied at the University of Oxford. One Oxford college, Christ Church, educated thirteen of them alone.[2] Later in the same book, Okwonga observes:

> Almost every schoolfriend whom I have seen express a political view on social media has been Conservative. And why wouldn't they be? This world works for them just as it is. It provides them with living standards and a basic level of comfort that are unimaginable to most people. Why the hell would they want to change that? Both of my boarding schools were overwhelmingly right-wing environments. . . . This was the world from which these politicians emerged—from which we all emerged—and it proves that you don't have to be cruel in your daily life to enact policies with cruel effects. You merely have to absorb the mantra, fed to you forever by such surroundings. (Okwonga 2021)[3]

Less appreciated in all the discussion of the harm caused by absorbing this mantra is how the flourishing of the private school and Oxbridge-educated in all walks of life—arts, the media, drama, music, business, politics, law, journalism—*ruins* England's culture, too. What has happened to the recklessness, harshness, superiority, cruelty, arrogance, cynicism, exceptionalism, and cliquism there? Are we to believe it just evaporates on encountering the creative industries? Can it really be that it is played out politically and psychologically but not culturally?

Eton were used as models by the Nazis when it came to setting up their own elite schools, known as Napolas. To this end, there were a large number of exchanges between schools in Britain and Germany between 1935 and 1938 that involved headmasters, teachers, and students.

[2] It's a situation that is echoed in the US. There, every president who held office during the thirty-two years that span from 1989 to 2021 attended an Ivy League school as either an undergraduate or graduate. That's a total of five presidents and eight presidential terms. Even more remarkedly, for a continuous stretch of twenty-eight years—1989 to 2017—every one of those presidents went to either Harvard or Yale. All except George W. Bush, that is. He went to both. The Harvard/Yale run only came to an end with the election of Donald Trump (Schwarz 2024).

[3] Recounting his experience at the school in the 1960s, Dillibe Onyeama ([1972] 2022), the first Black boy to graduate from Eton and only the second to attend it, reveals that its pupils were often very cruel in their daily lives too. See in particular the distressing chapter titled "Violence." Also distressing are the "Everyone's Invited" revelations in which girls as young as nine recount experiences of an institutionalized rape culture—often covered up or ignored by many private schools (Ewens 2021).

As we have seen, it's those "bad guys" from the two top socio-economic classes, who have been through this privileged part of the education system, who then go on to take a disproportionately prominent role in forming England's culture, and who do so in their own interests. It's this demographic that largely makes the rules as to what counts, what's acceptable as culture, and gatekeeps who is good enough to join the ranks of those that get to produce, publish, and disseminate it. (And consume it, of course.) To be judged as proper and credible—even as beautiful or moving—an instance of the creative arts must often be filtered through this anti-intellectual, upper- and middle-class, straight, White, male point of view. Yet England's culture is all too rarely understood in these terms. Just as being able-bodied, heterosexual, and cis is unmarked, so this predictable, nepotistic culture is also unmarked. It's regarded by those in the media, publishing, journalism, and so forth simply as *what culture is.* Hence, we have situations such as that described by Pamela Jikiemi, head of film, television, and audio at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art), where drama schools "are very much held in a chokehold by the white establishment . . . When you're white you get actor training, when you're Black you get training to be white" (Jikiemi, quoted in Mistlin 2021, 63). On the spectrum of good to bad, people who have been to private school and Oxbridge are generally considered—especially by those who have been through this elite system of education themselves—self-evidently superior when it comes to producing, presenting, and communicating culture. Superior because they know how to pursue the right sort of projects and ask the right sort of questions and adopt the right sort of confident, "polished" manner, down to the level of their accents, intonation, body language, and dress codes. They thus have their contributions ranked higher in the creative hierarchy. There is little sense that English society with its autocratic structure functions to impose a particular set of values and concerns onto much of its arts and culture. Nor that it belongs to those who have been to a small number of expensive schools and an even smaller number of exclusive universities. And that *this* is the reason these upper- and middle-class White people are held as being better at creating culture: because this system and its rules do indeed work well for them. Hardly astonishing really, since it's this demographic that so often make and police the rules. To provide an example of such policing in action taken from recent history: For nearly half a century, right into the 1990s, the BBC, the UK's largest cultural organization, drew on the assistance of MI5 (the UK's Security Service) to vet job applicants and prevent those

who either held leftist views themselves, or who had an associate or close relative who did, from being hired (Reynolds 2018). Meanwhile, those who are outside of this group (e.g., those whose parents were not in the two top socio-economic classes, who did not go to a fee-paying school, and who were not accepted to Oxbridge), are set up to struggle: both to learn these entrenched rules, and to be successful in operating within them if they do.[4] Consequently, the creative projects they pursue and the questions they ask and the manners they adopt are far more likely to be regarded as improper, inappropriate, objectionable, or as otherwise not marketable or credible, at best inferior in quality and lacking in taste. One result is that, in a context in which 48–49% of people identify as working class in the UK, those from working-class backgrounds constitute just 8.4% of the labor force in film, TV, video, radio, and photography (McAndrew et al. 2024).

The argument I'm making may seem familiar, especially to some of those who are *not* privileged, straight, and White.[5] Even so, it has implications that habitually go unrecognized. Addressing this situation is not merely a matter of devising a fairer means of distributing places at private schools and Oxbridge—say, by radically reducing Oxbridge's intake of privately educated UK undergraduates from the approximately 30% it is currently to a more representative 10% (Reeves and Friedman 2024); or by using a system of vouchers or a lottery (rather than interviews) as a means of being more inclusive of diversity. If nothing else, this would be to continue to conceive of these institutions in terms of a degree of respect and prestige they do not deserve. Nor can the issue be resolved by actions such as those pointed toward by the novelist Zadie Smith. In "Contempt as a Virus," the postscript to *Intimations,* a book of six essays written during the pandemic, Smith writes of the disdain of Black people as a virus that affects the left in the US as much as the right. Such contempt mistakes the symptoms for the cause, she says, quoting James Baldwin (2020, 67), and produces a mentality that:

[4] The same applies to those who don't attend a university at all and instead take up an apprenticeship (albeit a degree-level one), which is something Peter Lampl, the chairman of the Sutton Trust, has suggested more young people do (Lampl 2021; Turner 2021). I'll be more inclined to support advice of this kind when it's the children of the upper-middle classes in the southeast of England who are taking up the "vocational" apprenticeships, leaving more opportunities for those in the northeast and other parts of the UK to take their places at Oxbridge to study the humanities. Now that's what I'd call leveling up. Even then it would only be a first step, as we shall see in what follows.

[5] For more examples, see the stories of some of the 237 creative and cultural workers who were interviewed by Brook et al. (2020).

> looks over the fence and sees a plague people: plagued by poverty, first and foremost. *If this child, formed by poverty, sits in a class with my child, who was formed by privilege, my child will suffer—my child will catch their virus*. . . . And it's a naive American who at this point thinks that integration—if it were ever to actually occur—would not create some initial losses on either side. . . . But I am talking in hypotheticals: the truth is that not enough carriers of this virus have ever been willing to risk the potential loss of any aspect of their social capital to find out what kind of America might lie on the other side of segregation. They are very happy to "blackout" their social media for a day, to read all-black books, and "educate" themselves about black issues—as long as this education does not occur in the form of actual black children attending their actual schools. (Smith 2020, 68)

The answer is not just to provide more Black children in the US or UK with opportunities to attend the same "high quality" schools and universities as their White counterparts, important though that is. We need to go further than that. Further even than "normalizing the marginalized" by giving greater numbers of working-class, female-presenting, Black, Global Majority, LGBTQQIP2SAA+, GTRSB (Gypsy, Traveler, Roma, Showmen, and Boater), neuro-atypical and differently abled people, as well as those at the intersections of these identities, a chance to make *their* voices heard and *their* work seen.

Following the 2020 anti-racist uprisings in many places around the world, the journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge became the first Black Briton ever to top both the nonfiction paperback and overall UK book charts with *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (2017), while novelist Bernardine Evaristo became the first woman of color to top that for paperback fiction with *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) (for which she had shared the 2019 Booker Prize with Margaret Atwood for *The Testaments*). In the text of her Goldsmiths Prize Lecture that same year, Evaristo emphasizes that "novels need to be generated by and speak to a variety of demographics" (2020). And, of course, it is extremely valuable to "talk about who is writing the novel and what they are choosing to write about," as Evaristo says, and to include those whose histories have long been invalidated and excluded: "areas such as women's fiction, world literature or the lesbian novel" (2020), and writers such as Jacqueline Roy, Nicola Williams, and Judith Bryan who have been republished in Evaristo's Black Britain: Writing Back series (Penguin Books 2020).[6] I'm aware all this is situated in a particular time, place, and context.

[6] Onyeama's *A Black Boy at Eton* (2022) appears in the same series.

But—and this is a crucial aspect of the issue that too often goes unrecognized, even by many of those on the left—there remains a risk that England's sterile, anti-intellectual, White male culture will continue to dominate. As I put it in my 2021 book, *A Stubborn Fury: How Writing Works in Elitist Britain*, paraphrasing Eddo-Lodge, this culture will still thrive. There'll just be more women, northerners, and people of color involved in creating and disseminating it (2021, 106n8).

In some sectors we can see that this is indeed gradually coming to be the case. A survey of diversity, inclusion, and belonging in the UK publishing industry released in 2021 found that more than "half of executive leadership and senior management roles are held by women (52% and 55% respectively)." These figures represent an increase from 49% and 41% in 2017. Women take up 92% of publicity, 88% of rights, 83% of marketing and communications, and 78% of editorial roles (Publishers Association 2021b). Both Sharmaine Lovegrove, founder of Hachette imprint Dialogue Books, and Kishani Widyaratna, editorial director of 4th Estate, make the point that these tend to be "'white, middle-class, cis-gendered, heteronormative women'" (Lovegrove, quoted in Thomas-Corr 2021). It's a claim borne out by the Publishers Association 2020 survey of diversity in the industry's workforce, made available the same year. There, "3 per cent of respondents identified as Black or Black British, 6 per cent as Asian or Asian British, 3 per cent as having mixed or multiple ethnicities and 1 per cent of respondents identified as belonging to another minority ethnic group" (Publishers Association 2021a).

When it comes to who is producing the books these women are publishing, the majority are by female-identifying authors. "629 of the 1,000 bestselling fiction titles from 2020 were written by women (27 were co-authored by men and women and three were by nonbinary writers, leaving 341 by men). Within the 'general and literary fiction' category, 75% were by female authors . . ." (Thomas-Corr 2021). In fact, such is the concern over the comparative shortage of new and young male authors in literary fiction that it has led to the launch, in the spring of 2025, of a new independent press dedicated specifically to supporting their work, Conduit Books.

This does not necessarily mean cis-gendered, heteronormative male authors are finding it more difficult to get published than they did in the past, despite a number of claims made to this effect in articles with headlines such as "Men 'Suffer Sexism in Publishing Industry' as White Middle-Class Women Elbow Them Out" (Simpson 2021). As several commentators have

acknowledged, it could be fewer men aspire to write literary fiction now. After all, being a novelist doesn't have quite the same cultural cachet it did when the likes of D.H. Lawrence, George Orwell, and Graham Green were in their pomp. Not so many men are perhaps growing up with an ambition to be the Albert Camus or Jack Kerouac of their generation. There's also little chance of making large amounts of money from literary fiction these days. Only a very small number of novelists do so, certainly enough to make writing a full-time job. Most need to have part-time employment or other sources of income and financial support. Many male authors are therefore more interested in genres such as fantasy and horror, or in nonfiction: history, biography, commentary, self-help (see Thomas-Corr 2021; Gould 2021).[7] Even then, the 2022 ALCS survey reveals that the average earning of a self-employed author in the UK is £7,000.[8] That represents a 38% decline in real terms in just the four years since 2018. (Nor do they benefit from the kind of incentives enjoyed in the Republic of Ireland, where the majority of income from writing is exempt from taxation.) Moreover, 47% of total earnings are claimed by a mere 10% of authors—although it should be noted that "[w]omen, black and mixed-race authors, the very young, and very old, all earn less than their respective counterparts" (Thomas et al. 2022).

Whatever the reason, men no longer have the dominant literary status they once did. Great White Males such as Martin Amis and Will Self from the 1980s and 1990s, and even David Mitchell and Tom McCarthy from the 2000s and 2010s, are out of fashion. It's Ali Smith and Bernardine Evaristo—also recipient of the inaugural £100,000 Women's Prize for Fiction's Outstanding Contribution Award in 2025 and current president of the Royal Society of Literature (the first Black woman to have held the position since it was founded in 1820 and the first not educated at Eton or Oxbridge)—who are feted culturally as producing some of the most exciting new fiction. And that's without mentioning Sally Rooney in Ireland, whom the *New York Times* has dubbed "the first great millennial author." Indeed,

[7] The largest advances to be had for authors tend to be for memoirs, with the greatest decline in income in recent years being experienced by literary writers (Hall 2021a, 35, 110, n21)—though just lately sales for nonfiction are also reported to be at their lowest for two decades.

[8] Self-published authors, particularly those using platforms such as Amazon's Kindle, tend to fare slightly better. A 2023 survey by the Alliance of Independent Authors, which gathered responses from around two thousand self-published writers, found that 41% earned over $20,000 in revenue. The majority concentrated on a few key genres, with romance, fantasy/science fiction/speculative fiction, and crime/thriller/detective stories the most popular, collectively accounting for 57% of respondents (Alliance of Independent Authors 2023, 2).

whereas previously it was White men who ruled the literary prize scene in Britain, over a fifth of the authors shortlisted in 2020 were Black. That's a significant shift for an industry in which no Black writers were shortlisted at all for four of the years between 1996 and 2009 (these being 1996, 2001, 2002, and 2009) (Mohdin et al. 2021).[9]

I want to offer two points by way of further qualification. First, the change in who gets published, read, and selected for literary prizes is a relatively recent phenomenon—2020 was the year of the Black Lives Matter protests, after all. While the racial diversity of nominees may be on the increase, and while the production of all-female literary prize long and short lists may also be a more frequent occurrence, some reports indicate that the number of Black authors being published has declined noticeably in the last few years (Bakare 2025). Viewed from a longer-term perspective, this *shift* could thus well turn out to be a *blip*: a set of temporary exceptions that ultimately prove the continuing rule of the old order. Especially considering how Kamala Harris's 2024 electoral defeat at the hands of Trump has been framed by many progressives in the US and UK as heralding the end of the "Big Woke" era of #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, DEI programs, and Defund the Police ("It's all so 2017"), rather than as an indication that the US Democrats—and indeed the liberal-left—also need to change. This narrative aligns with a growing perception that the central political divide today is no longer between left and right but between those who are inside or outside the liberal establishment. Many in the latter group have come to view all politicians as basically the same: self-serving, corrupt, and working against the interests of ordinary people. At its most extreme, this disillusionment has fueled the belief that meaningful change can only be achieved through spectacular acts of violence such as the December 2024 shooting of Brian Thompson, CEO of the American health insurance company UnitedHealthcare, on a New York street. Yet, to repeat, it's precisely *because* liberal democracy is seen as

[9] There has also been a shift in the proportion of children's titles with a Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) presence published in the UK. Of the 11,011 children's books published in the UK in 2018, only 743 had a BAME presence. 7% featured BAME characters and just 4% had a BAME lead character—and that's with BAME pupils making up 33% of the school population in England (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education 2019; Hall 2021a, 25). By 2020 those figures had increased to 15% of the 5,875 children's books published in the UK featuring BAME characters and 8% of them featuring a BAME main character, with the percentage of BAME pupils of primary school age increasing to 34% (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education 2021). Come 2022, they had grown still further, with 30% of the 3,195 books reviewed featuring BAME characters and 14% featuring a main character from a BAME background (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education 2023).

failing by so many people (and so is under such intense attack) that we need to advocate for the defunding of culture and the radical redistribution of opportunities and resources.

Second, as other observers have remarked, whether this shift in who gets published, read, and nominated for literary prizes means that female-presenting and Black and Global Majority writers are now being given, if not the same money, then the same status and authority as their White male counterparts—to comment on the larger political issues of the day, for instance, rather than those of a more intimate nature—is open to question. It's hard to think of a woman or person of color who could be said to have supplanted Tom McCarthy as England's *leading* avant-garde novelist, for example.

Still, what we can say is that there does seem to be something of a change in *who* is writing and publishing (even if it's complicated). What we can't say is that there is a change in *how* they are doing so.

PART 2

AND HERE'S SOME OF THE THINGS WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

CHAPTER FOUR

Culture and the University as White, Male, Public Space

Liberal Humanist

It's often those writing critically on race who go furthest in showing why it's not enough to just have more diversity, equity, and inclusivity. They accentuate the need to transform the dominant discourse network and its manufactured common sense not only about *who* writes and publishes—which people from which backgrounds and communities—and what they are being conditioned to write about. While welcome, such changes can be implemented without threatening the cultural status quo too much or the financial interests of those who rule over it.[1] These critics show that what's even more important is how people write and publish: *how* writing, publishing, and subjectivity are enacted and *performed*.

Previously, I've drawn on the anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-hetero-patriarchal approach of Latin Americanist theorists such as Arturo Escobar, alongside the infrapolitics of Alberto Moreiras, to think further about this

[1] As Olah writes, such emphasis on diversity and inclusivity "isn't a chance to transform the status quo," as it necessarily "dictates conformity" to its rules, judgements, and values. Rather, it's a call to join the very system that has traditionally undervalued the people in those marginalized communities these "'minority'" applicants come from (which is why the Trump administration is so hostile to DEI initiatives). It's an invitation to make merely the smallest of modifications to this system that are tolerable within its protective regulations regarding decency, morality, and good taste (2019, 158).

issue (Hall 2021b, 2025).[2] I've engaged with critical theorists because contemporary theory helps us to understand our modes of being and doing in the world, imagine them differently, and so change them. Theory—and the university more broadly—is one site for experimenting with such possibilities. And this is the case, even if it is not the only such test site (Hall 2025, 268); and even as the Euro-Western university faces increasing pressure to abandon this role—whether from Trump and his acolytes, culture war warriors, or the neoliberal demand that higher education serve primarily an instrumental economic function, creating jobs, generating wealth, and so on. This is why it's crucial for academics—and theorists especially—to take a lead: It's our job! (It's also why, in the second part of this book, I'm shifting focus somewhat to concentrate on the role theory and the university can play in tackling the issues set out in the first.)

When it comes to theory helping us understand our modes of being and doing, in addition to that of Escobar and Moreiras, there's also the work of intersectional feminist Sara Ahmed. She has written powerfully about "diversity as welcome," as "an invitation to those who are not yet part to become part," to be assimilated into the dominant way of doing things; and about how much of culture, and the academy within it, is White male public space:

> When we talk of "white men" we are describing an institution. "White men" is an institution. By saying this, what I am saying? An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given community. So, when I am saying that "white men" is an institution I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure. A building is shaped by a series of regulative norms. "White men" refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is there, who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived; behaviour as bond. (Ahmed 2014)

There's that of anthropologist Zoe Todd as well, to cite beyond the usual roster of "brand" or "rock star" theorists. Todd draws on Ahmed to critique

[2] In *Against Abstraction*, Moreiras defines infrapolitics as the "attempt to think or rethink politics from the region of the ontico-ontological difference." Infrapolitics can thus "be said to be the only properly political interrogation of politics (the rest is a program)." For Moreiras, "infrapolitics points to the excess, the nonsubjective remainder of experience, to the fact that not all experience falls within the subjectivist purview. . . . In doing this, infrapolitics reveals the aporetic condition of the political . . . and the exhaustion of the modern categories with which to think it" (2020, 33, 192).

the philosopher Bruno Latour's failure to reference contemporary Indigenous scholars in his research on cosmopolitics:

> What I have experienced in the UK academy is what Ahmed describes: white men as an institution that reproduces itself in its own image. It is important to note that Ahmed speaks to the structures of whiteness, and indeed we must remember that a critique of whiteness is meant to draw attention to the *structural, routinised* aspects of "white public space." Ahmed goes on to describe how this reproduction is citational: one must cite white men to get ahead. (Todd 2016)

And we need only to look at certain fields such as media philosophy—not forgetting those associated with the "trendy and dominant Ontological Turn," as Todd characterizes it: Actor Network Theory, speculative realism, object-oriented philosophy, media archaeology, cosmopolitics—to find plenty of scholars, including women and those from Black and Global Majority communities, who overwhelmingly cite White men.

We thus have a situation in which both culture and the academy in the West are spaces where those who are not upper- and middle-class White men, or—and this is important when thinking about issues of diversity, equality, and social justice—who are not aspiring to be and therefore do not conform to their regulative norms and codes of conduct, are more often marginalized or excluded. They are less likely to be employed or published in the first place; and if they are, struggle to be promoted, retained, or awarded permanent full-time positions. This pattern is particularly evident in Western-model universities, as an article provoked by the refusal of Harvard to grant tenure to Cornel West, Nikole Hannah-Jones, and Lorgia García Peña highlights:

> It turns out . . . that the topics that scholars of color often research are less likely to receive research funding and, at least in some fields, are less likely to be included in the very journals that are valued for promotion. Scholars of color are also less likely than white scholars to be cited when their work is published. And on the teaching front, women and people of color are often evaluated more poorly than white men, even when they are teaching identical content. (Matias et al. 2021)

Beyond employment and publication, those who are not privileged White men tend to hold lower status positions and receive fewer opportunities and rewards. Research on the class pay gap in the UK, published by the Social Mobility Foundation in 2022, found that those from working-class backgrounds in professional occupations are on average paid 13.5% less than

their more advantaged peers. In effect, they are laboring almost one day in seven, 13% of the year, for free. Again, women and most ethnic minorities are at an even greater disadvantage. Women earn £9,450 less than their male colleagues from working-class origins, even when both are employed in higher professional-managerial positions. "People who are of Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean heritage are paid £10,432 and £8,770 less respectively than their White peers in the same jobs" (Department for Opportunities 2022).

A similar dynamic plays out at an institutional level. Universities that are not dominated by the inherited standards and structures of the bourgeois White patriarchy are frequently seen as less prestigious and ranked lower.[3] It's a bias particularly visible within Anglo-American higher education. As cultural theorist Angela McRobbie writes of the UK context:

> The effect of contemporary neoliberalism in the field of education has been to succeed in creating a new common-sense about the university system. . . . The downside of this is that it has become normal to disregard local universities and to only hold in esteem those belonging to the Russell Group. . . . Competition translates into re-invoking class-based (not to say ethnic and gendered) hierarchies, and this in turn becomes part of the wider culture. We begin to get used to comments from parents and their teenage children and teachers, as well as from journalists and commentators that what really matters is getting into a "top university." (McRobbie 2018)

To avoid possible misunderstanding, I want to make clear that as far as the arts policy analyzed in the first part of this book is concerned, I'm not advocating that we reject the middle class entirely.[4] What I'm arguing is that:

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[3] Nor is this dynamic confined to higher education. Because the pandemic disrupted schooling in 2020, an algorithm was used in England to determine the exam results of A-level students. This algorithm was conceived in Coventry, at the headquarters of the exam regulator, Ofqual. Its use to decide in advance which schools were successful and which were not made clear to many the extent of the bias in the educational system against those from less well-off backgrounds.

In 2020–2021 the situation grew even worse. Just 39% of comprehensive school students were awarded A's or A*s, compared to 42% of those who attended state academies and a striking 70% of those educated independently. As Starmer highlighted at the time, instead of narrowing the attainment gap had widened: "'The gap between private schools and state schools has gone up. It was 20%, now it's 30%'" (Starmer, quoted in Hatton 2021). In February 2022 Labour even called for an inquiry when it was revealed that some private schools in England had awarded more than eight times the number of top grades in 2021 as they had before the pandemic.

[4] It may be helpful to say something about the different ways in which the term "middle class" is commonly used in the UK and the US, even though the broader social dynamics underlying these distinctions are often similar. In the UK, middle class typically refers to

First, it's important to recognize their approach to arts and culture—which prevails because the middle- and upper-classes so often establish and enforce the rules of this (Euro-Western, White, male) value framework—is neither "natural" nor inevitable. It is not the only possible foundation for public policy, despite how it is often presented. Nor, if we truly want change—if we want culture in Britain to be fair, diverse, less monotonous, less homogeneous, less anti-intellectual—is it enough to simply integrate more women, northerners, and people of color into this existing middle-class system (the very system that has historically excluded and dispossessed them). As we have seen, that kind of "social mobility" merely reinforces the status quo. Instead, we need to deprioritize and defund this system and its institutions while actively fostering and investing in the development of alternative approaches, institutions, and values.

Second, if we continue to center the middle class and uphold their values—such as by advocating for increased public investment in the arts as they currently exist, as many in the UK are doing—we will merely end up with more of the same. While the policy may change, the underlying framework will remain in place; the same Euro-Western, White, male, middle-class liberal humanist people and institutions will continue to amass power, wealth, and resources, only with greater support than they have currently.

Third, this approach—of prioritizing the middle class and its associated programs, say, on the basis that Black, minority ethnic, and working-class people can only benefit if the middle-class benefits—has already been tried. In fact, it has long been the dominant strategy. "And look where it has got us!," you might exclaim. While the middle class has reaped the benefits from public policies concerning arts and culture in the past, it is questionable how much has genuinely improved for others. In fact, compared to certain periods, such as the 1960s, the situation has grown markedly worse. As

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professionals and those with university educations, but it also carries negative cultural connotations: of pretentiousness, blandness, mediocrity, snobbery. The stigma is strong enough that many who are objectively middle class in terms of occupation or income hesitate to identify as such. Instead, they prefer to see themselves as working-class individuals who have done well despite the comparatively rigid nature of the UK's class system, thus maintaining a connection to values perceived as more authentic and "real." In the US, by contrast, the absence of a strong aristocratic history or royal family means class identity is seen as more fluid. Middle class is understood more in economic terms than cultural markers such as taste, accent, or family background. It is also viewed more positively, signifying normalcy and social belonging, with the majority of people identifying as part of this broad, egalitarian group. As a result, the North American middle class encompasses a wider socioeconomic range, often including those who, in the UK, would typically be considered working class. This explains why, in the US, someone with a well-paying blue-collar job may still be regarded as middle class.

Natalie Olah argues, in a period when the media have been "increasingly narrated as a force of openness and social mobility," its outputs have in many respects "become far more monocultural and limited to the upper-middle-class experience." Whereas previously the media might have taken a risk on a broader spectrum of talent—"commissioning work by, and for, working-class people," for instance, starting with The Beatles in the 1960s—since 2010 it has moved its attention more and more to concentrate on the "safe and dependable middle-class consumer base" (2019, 11, 12).[5]

Fourth, it is this very approach—and the middle class along with it—that is being rejected across much of the democratic-capitalist world: from the US to Hungary, Argentina, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. And this includes its being rejected by ethnic minorities and the working class—perhaps especially by them. As I've suggested, the key political divide today may no longer be between left and right but between those who are inside or outside the liberal establishment, including its middle-class arts and cultural institutions. It's a set of circumstances that has resulted in many on the left feeling defeated, disheartened, stuck in a cycle of pessimism, and unsure of what to do next.

So where do we go from here? How do we create real change? I'm concerned to provide a sense of the possibilities but, as I keep insisting, more of the same is not the answer. This is why *Defund Culture* is framed as a speculation—and as pluriversalist. Accordingly, I'm not completely rejecting the middle class. I'm proposing that, given our current situation, it's time to open a discussion about thinking differently and exploring alternative approaches. That's what this book is endeavoring to do.

It's at this point that things become even more *challenging*, however. For the argument I'm making in *Defund Culture* is we need to recognize that culture—and the university within it—is not just White, male, middle-class space. It is Euro-Western, modernist, *liberal*, White, male, middle-class space.[6] Indeed, it is precisely because culture is liberal that it is White, male, middle-class space.

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[5] Olah's argument is based on the findings of Brook et al. (2018). It should be noted that Olah and Brook et al. were writing before the events of 2020.

[6] Thomas Nagel and Duncan Bell are among several contemporary political theorists to argue that liberalism as a philosophy, ideology, and tradition very much governs how we in the Global North and West understand the world. For Nagel, "it is a significant fact about our age that most political argument in the Western world now goes on between different branches of liberalism" (2003, 62). Bell, following Nagel, likewise insists that nearly all "inhabitants of the West are now conscripts of liberalism"—that the range of the liberal tradition "has expanded to encompass the vast majority of political positions

Liberalism as a political philosophy first began to take shape in the second half of the seventeenth century, toward the end of the 150-year timespan of social and political instability in Europe that was set off by the Protestant Reformation (which was itself set off by the invention of print). It is based on the idea of free human individuals using their capacity for reason to enter consensually into an agreed formal contract with other free human individuals to maintain their universal rights to freedom, life, and property—it being Immanuel Kant who initially linked the ideals of early European liberalism with the principles of Enlightenment universalism. Under liberalism everyone is *supposed* to have the same right to participate in the public domain: to initiate and interrogate topics of public discussion, for instance, and to reflect upon and challenge the rules for doing so.[7] This equality of autonomy and opportunity is what is required for society to be just and fair. Yet for liberalism, some individuals are freer and more equal than others. This is especially true of the classical unmarked and disembodied White male liberal subject of the epistemological Global North and West. Liberalism may position itself in a relation of contrast to nationalist or religious social systems that restrict rights to certain privileged classes, genders, or races. But liberalism's emphasis on universal rights has never been applied universally: It has referred primarily to privileged, Euro-Western, Christian, White, male and cis, heterosexual human individuals. Precisely because such rights are held to be universal, however, these individuals have regarded themselves as having the responsibility—the "civilizing mission" even—to impose their liberalism onto others.

John Stuart Mill is an infamous example. Mill has been called both the father of liberalism and "the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century" (Macleod 2016). Yet Mill was also a colonial administrator for the British East India Company from 1823 right up to 1858,

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regarded as legitimate . . . and most who identify themselves as socialists, conservatives, social democrats, republicans, greens, feminists, and anarchists have been ideologically incorporated, whether they like it or not" (2014, 689).

[7] Given the above argument for defunding culture, it's worth recalling in this context that the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was created in 1940 to help sustain and promote British culture during the Second World War, partly because of the perceived link between the kind of liberal-democratic political freedom people were fighting for and artistic freedom. After the war, CEMA was retitled the Arts Council of Great Britain, which was eventually succeeded in turn by Arts Council England. Tellingly, the funding of the Arts Council of Great Britain was restricted to Central London, the majority of it going to organizations with which its first chairman, John Maynard Keynes, who had also been a chair of CEMA, had a close connection, including the Royal Opera House.

just one year before the publication of his classic work of liberal philosophy, *On Liberty.* In that book, written with his partner Harriet Taylor (although in a further example of liberalism's privileging of relatively well-off White men, her contribution often goes unacknowledged and unattributed), *he* reveals why there is no contradiction between his liberal values and the violent regime he was helping to maintain in India.[8] (We can think here of the liberal belief that the individual's free, voluntary, and undeceived consent is the foundation of the legitimacy of government, this being a "consent of the governed" Britain didn't trouble itself too much about acquiring in its colonies.) There is no contradiction because Mill does not consider Indian people to be fully civilized human individuals. Indeed, he goes so far as to offer a version of the "white man's burden" in *On Liberty.* When it comes to dealing with those regarded as "barbarians," he writes, despotism is a perfectly "legitimate mode of government . . . provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end" (Mill [1859] 2001, 14).

Mill is merely one of the better-known examples of how, for liberals and liberalism, the freedom of individuals really means the freedom of certain White male individuals (who nonetheless claim the right to speak for everyone and everything). Others include the fact that the majority of those who signed the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776, with its insistence on the self-evident truth that "all men are created equal," were themselves the owners of other human individuals as property.[9] These slaves were *neither free nor equal*. At one point they were calculated to represent only three-fifths of a free person. Ever since, the United States has been a liberal democratic nation that is, on the one hand, based on the idea that everyone is equal, and, on the other, riven with laws and practices that have denied that equality to large sections of its population, particularly along racial lines. (Many fear this latter aspect of North American society is being exacerbated by Trump's second presidency—to the point of driving the nation away from democracy and toward fascism and the kind of pre-civil rights policies associated with the Jim Crow era.)

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[8] The practice of privileging men continues today. As late as 2022 it was found that women in research teams had a far lower likelihood of receiving authorship credit compared to men (Ross et al. 2022).

[9] The US Declaration of Independence, the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776 which influenced it, the French Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, and Thomas Paines's *Rights of Man* of 1791 all speak of the rights of men (not women). The chain was broken only in 1807 by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

It is a *modus operandi* on liberalism's part that can be tracked to the very beginnings of the European Enlightenment, for all the latter's belief in progress, impartiality, objectivity, tolerance, and respect for fair and rational debate.[10] It is certainly present in John Locke's view of animals, plants, and the environment as "inferior" nonhuman others with no natural rights. As he makes clear in the *Two Treatises of Government,* published anonymously in 1690, this means that, while they may be owned and shared by humankind in common, free human individuals can transform these resources into private property by virtue of the labor they invest in them, whether that be hunting, farming, fishing, or mining (Locke [1690] 1980).

Locke's view of nature and property, and of nature as property, like his conception of individual liberty—of which a person's right to property and possessions that "no-one ought to harm" plays an important part—was a key influence on the historical development of both the European Enlightenment and liberalism. It was also used as justification for colonialism. By positioning Euro-Western practices of agriculture and animal husbandry as the only correct approaches to natural resources, Western nations were able to regard Indigenous people as being in a state of nature, and thus as having no rights that could prevent their environment or anything within it from being extracted and transformed into private property; property that could then be subject to economic transactions. Hence the importance the decolonial studies writer and philosopher Walter D. Mignolo attaches to thinking of Europeans themselves as Indigenous:

> Thinking that Europeans are indigenous means, for me, that Europeans are people like anybody else and not the prototype of human and humanity that they invented for themselves and used as measuring stick to classify and identify "Indians" first in the Americas and then since 1640 "Indigenous," the non-European population of the planet who were on the land that they wanted. The indigenous were ranked as lesser humans, sexually and racially. And that is racism, an epistemic classification of people to control, dominate and dispose. Indigenous is a European invention to classify non-European populations. It is defined in the dictionary as "born or originating in a particular place." As in the case of the Third World, at some point indigenous people appropriated the name to their own geopolitical affirmation. (Mignolo 2018)

[10] It should be acknowledged at this point that some maintain the word "'liberalism' was 'not used in the eighteenth century, where the adjective "liberal" did not bear its modern meaning, and though elements were present which would in due course be assembled by means of this formula, there was no system of doctrine corresponding to its later use'" (Bell 2014, 688; quoting Pocock 2003, 579).

By the same token, others argue that modernist liberal humanism should be downgraded from its central position as a homogenizing—and colonizing—universal benchmark by which everything else is to be judged, to merely one system of thought among a global multi-polarity of others: a system that is, indeed, indigenous to Europe and the West. Yet this structure of thought, whereby those that comfortably-off, middle- and upper-class White men consider to be inferior and Other are excluded from having equal rights to life, liberty, and property, as Locke famously put it, can be traced back further than 1690 to some of liberal theory's earliest origins in the Putney Debates. Held in 1647 shortly after the first English civil war and chaired by Oliver Cromwell, these were a series of discussions among the New Model Army, a lot of them Levellers, over the composition of a new constitutional settlement for Britain. It was here that (in the West at least) the notion of inalienable individual rights, including freedom of religious worship, freedom from conscription into the military, and freedom from indiscriminate imprisonment, was established. (Prior to this, people only had privileges and specified liberties, which were given to them—and could be taken away again—by the powers that be: the monarchy, aristocracy, church.) However, it was accepted that these rights, like the Putney Debates themselves, did not include women. Foreigners, servants, debtors, and beggars were also excluded.[11]

This is why it can be said that it is *because* culture is liberal (and not in spite of it), that it is Euro-Western, modernist, White, male, middle-class public space. I want to emphasize these other aspects of culture and the university, which for shorthand will at times be referred to in the rest of this book as *liberal* or *liberal humanist* (in part to underline the centrality of the human). I want to emphasize them for the simple reason that we can't escape complicity with the institution of "White men" if, to remix and repurpose Ahmed and Todd somewhat, the categories and frameworks that are used to perform this decolonization of thought—whether it happens *inside* or *outside* of the

[11] Political scientist Francis Fukuyama and political journalist Ian Dunt are just two "liberal" authors to have traced the history of liberalism at book length recently, in *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (2022) and *How to Be a Liberal* (2020), respectively. Meanwhile, in *The Dawn of Everything* (2021), anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow point toward the Western-centrism of such a history. According to them, a number of Enlightenment concepts, including personal freedom, emerged from the "indigenous critique" of European colonialist culture by the likes of the Wendat (Huron) leader Kandiaronk. The Adario of *Dialogues avec un sauvage Adario* by Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron de Lahontan, is just a pseudonym for Kandiaronk, they argue—although this has been disputed by some who consider Adario to be a literary construct.

current neoliberal university (in the form of free autonomous universities or fugitive study, say)—persist in recreating the academy's White, male, and middle-class, liberal humanist superiority. In other words, we can't expect "lasting change, or decolonization, to occur" (Todd 2016, 16), we can't "bring the house of whiteness down" (Ahmed 2014), if we continue to practice our disciplines in liberal humanist terms: that is, according to the narrow worldview of privileged White men, their regulative norms and codes of conduct regarding the composition, presentation, publication, and communication of research and scholarship. It's for this reason that Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh argue it is important to develop new ways of "thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living" that de-link from the construction of Western thought on modernist terms. As far as they are concerned, if "there is no modernity without coloniality," if coloniality is "constitutive, not derivative, of modernity," then the "end of modernity" implies the "end of coloniality" (Walsh and Mignolo 2018, 4).

In a little dwelt-upon passage of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, meanwhile, the philosopher Michel Foucault asserts that liberalism should be analyzed, "not as a theory or an ideology . . . but as a practice, which is to say, a 'way of doing things'" (2008, 318). Foucault's insistence on the need to interrogate liberalism as a practice helps us appreciate something important when it is brought to bear on our *way of doing things* as theorists and scholars. We may espouse explicitly anti-liberal (and anti-neoliberal) theories. We may subject many aspects of the liberal tradition to radical intellectual critique, including its marginalization of low-income and working-class people, female-identifying people, Jewish people, Black and Brown people, trans and nonbinary people, neuroatypical, and differently abled people. Yet we remain liberals nonetheless by virtue of *how* we live, make, and think in the world. With regards to contemporary theory (and much else besides), some of the blind spots or datum points in such Euro-Western, modernist, liberal ways of doing things involve: the autonomous—and proprietorial—human subject; the self-identical rational liberal individual as the ultimate point of reference; and the named author as romantic or modernist genius. They also appear in the preference for linear thought; clear, plain, and concise language that can be readily understood; and the privileging of a coherent, single-voiced, narrative truth. This extends to the long-form, sequentially developed argument that provides a consistent through-line within a text; and to the convention of the consecutively paged book or journal article, designed to be read in a progressive temporal order. It also encompasses

the unified, homogeneous, fixed and finished autograph text—seen as the perfect human-made object—published in uniform, multiple-copy editions and distributed on a mass industrial basis. Last but not least for now, this epistemic framework places a high value on monumentality, originality, creativity, self-expression, authenticity, and copyright.[12]

To provide a snapshot example: If—riffing on an argument that has been made at different times by both Walter Benjamin and Jessica Pressman—the print book serves as a symbolic representation of and proxy for White, male, middle-class liberal humanism, then we can't change that simply by publishing or citing larger numbers of books by thinkers who are *not* middle-class White men (Benjamin 1973; Pressman 2016).[13] That risks just being more White, male, middle-class liberal humanism. As Ahmed concludes: "It takes conscious willed and willful effort not to reproduce an inheritance" (2014). (It's worth remembering that the novel is also a bourgeois European invention.) We don't necessarily need new books, then. Or indeed new theory. (Or new novels.)[14] All that risks being more of the same.

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[12] Tracing the genealogy of these data points would require a book in itself. Some developed in the course of the emergence of modern, Western liberal humanism: the taking of the self-identical rational individual as ultimate reference, for instance. (Even then, ideas of individualism evolved over centuries, not least under the influence of the Catholic Church and European law [Fukuyama 2023, 44].) Others pre-date it. The latter include having as an organizing principle the "presentation of connected and sequential facts or concepts" in a prescribed lineal order. As McLuhan makes clear, this principle derives from the "phonetic alephbet," which is "a construct of fragmented bits and parts which have no semantic meaning in themselves, and which must be strung together in a line" to make sense (McLuhan and Fiore [1967] 2008, 45, 44). The first alphabetic system dates back to the Bronze Age.

[13] In discussion at the "Charisma of the Book: Global Perspectives for the 21st Century" symposium, held at the NYU Abu Dhabi Institute in 2016, Pressman made the point that the "book is a symbol of the human and the humanities." But we can also recall here the connection Walter Benjamin makes in "The Storyteller" between the print book and the human individual via the novel: "What distinguishes the novel from the story . . . is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing." Furthermore, the "birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual. . . . To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life" (1973, 87).

Meanwhile, not citing White men is the "strict and explicit" policy that Ahmed says in "White Men" she has adopted when writing *Living a Feminist Life* (2017).

[14] For George Orwell, the writer is a liberal by definition (1940). But as we have known since Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*, the novel is also intrinsically linked to humanism and the human individual. Indeed, for Watt: "The novel is the form of literature which most fully reflects [modernity's] individualist and innovating reorientation . . . [Its] primary criterion was truth to individual experience. . . . [T]he novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience" (1957, 13). More recently, Isabella Hammad, writing on the closeness of humanism to coloniality and colonial violence in the context of the Palestinian struggle, describes novels as reflecting on "the perpetuation of a human

This is why it is important to go further than situating one's knowledge, to reference Donna Haraway's influential idea (1988). ("Situated knowledge" is a term that has itself been dislocated from its embeddedness in specific knowledge situations to become something of a fashionable floating signifier in the contemporary humanities.) Or, for that matter, acknowledging one's individual authorial subject position: say, as an academic in the Western university system, operating in a disciplinary environment strongly influenced by European theory, as reflected in the references made and sources drawn upon. Or even, in the words of writer Otegha Uwagba, checking one's "privilege (white or otherwise) . . . to make clear to others that you are at least *aware* of the unfair advantages you've been granted by virtue of skin colour, class background, gender, or whatever your own particular stroke of luck." We need to go further than this first because: "Conveying that self-awareness" can become "an end in itself, a moral get-out clause alleviating the pressure to do anything more substantial to offset that privilege" (Uwagba 2020, 58–59). And second because you can do all this and continue to act as a White, male, middle-class, liberal humanist, whether you identify as one or not. What we really need are new, de-liberalizing (an awkward term, I know) modes of working and living.

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impulse to use and experience narrative form as a way of making sense of the world" (2024, 77, 6).

To provide one last example that can stand in for many others, listen to what the experimental writer B.S. Johnson says the novel can do best: "precise use of language, exploitation of the technological fact of the book, the explication of thought . . . taking an audience inside character's minds . . . telling it what people are thinking." In fact, for Johnson, writing in 1972–1973, the "history of the novel in the twentieth century has seen large areas of the old territory of the novelist increasingly taken over by other media, until the only thing the novelist can with any certainty call exclusively his [sic] own is the inside of his own skull: and that is what he should be exploring." Will something similar happen to the book and novel as Johnson says happened to the nineteenth-century narrative novel by the time of the First World War—regardless of the fact that "today the neo-Dickensian novel not only receives great praise, review space and sales but also acts as a qualification to elevate its authors to chairs at universities?" Will the book and novel likewise "become exhausted, clapped out . . . anachronistic, invalid, irrelevant, perverse" (Johnson 1973)?

CHAPTER FIVE

De-Liberalizing Culture and Theory

In the context established by *Defund Culture*, Reni Eddo-Lodge is significantly more radical than the mainstream popularity of her book might imply, for all some have found *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* confrontational, even controversial. Those who read it (rather than merely react to its title) will find passages such as the following: "After a lifetime of embodying difference, I have no desire to be equal. I want to deconstruct the structural power of a system that marked me out as different. I don't wish to be assimilated into the status quo" (Eddo-Lodge 2017). For me, this *deconstruction of structural power* must include the persistent mechanisms and habits of mind that legacy theorists—including Latour, Escobar, and even Ahmed—continue to conform to when they write and present their books *as if* they are the personal expressions of an autonomous named individual—one who lives and labors in isolation from all human and nonhuman others, and who has the moral and legal right to be recognized as their original, sovereign, proprietorial authors. What's more, this is the case even though these legacy theorists may explicitly acknowledge in the content of their work that a given composition is an "emergent heterogenous assemblage," and that "all creation is collective, emergent, and relational" (Escobar 2018, xv, xvi). They then hand their books over to *reputable* publishing firms (Duke, Stanford, MIT, etc.). These firms turn them into commercial products in the shape of materially conventional, fixed and finished volumes of long-form

argument, which can be purchased at a price determined by the copyright and property regime presided over by late capitalism's market logic. It's a configuration of power that works to make sure a relatively small number of ambitious, high-profile, and well-resourced thinkers continue to have ideas, concepts, indeed whole philosophies and worldviews, attributed to them as *theirs*, as part of their unique intellectual trademarks.[1] As the writer Kevin Ochieng Okoth asks in an article on "Decolonisation and Its Discontents" with respect to the decolonial studies of Mignolo, Walsh, and others: "What are the implications for anti-imperialist struggle in the global South if those at the forefront of challenging the Eurocentricity of knowledge production are based in the resource-hoarding universities [and publishing houses, I would add] of the global North (especially the US)? Is there not a danger of reproducing precisely the kind of epistemic coloniality from which we are trying to de-link?" (Ochieng Okoth 2021).

There certainly is. But as I argue in *Masked Media* (2025), this risk cannot be avoided simply by adopting a "south-to-north" approach that insists that, as well as the likes of Arturo Escobar, we reference Latin Americans who have chosen to live in that cultural region: Daniel Mato or Orlando Fals-Borda, for instance (as was suggested by one of the peer reviewers of this book). Such a perspective assumes a geographically fixed understanding of Latin America. It is one that, as Mato emphasizes, is "historically constructed" and "confined more often than not to geographical reference points that privilege so-called Latin American nation-states," thereby "omitting significant populations currently living outside a particular region" (Mato 2020b, 482). Even setting that aside, publishing structures still complicate matters. Mato's *How to Tell Stories: A Latin American Perspective* (2020a) appeared in English translation through Under the Stone Publishing in Phoenix, while Fals-Borda's *People's Participation: Challenges Ahead* (1998) was published in English by Apex Press in New York. I won't delve into the specific philosophies of these two small, independent presses. Suffice it to say, Under the Stone is an imprint of The Small-Tooth-Dog Publishing Group, Apex affiliated with the Council on International and Public Affairs, a nonprofit dedicated to human rights education, research, and advocacy. Nor do I mean to unfairly single out Mato and Fals-Borda. I cite them as examples of a broader issue. For as academic and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson warns, the danger of such a South-to-North approach is it risks "meeting the overwhelming needs of the Western academic industrial complex" by incorporating knowledges

[1] This description of the habits of writing and publishing is derived from Hall (2021b).

of the epistemological Global South into that complex on the latter's own terms, in its own interests, and even in its dominant language (2014, 13; Hall 2025, 226). It is a concern that underpins her concept of "Indigenous refusal"—a deliberate rejection of seeking greater acceptance or recognition within the structures of the Western academy (2014, 22; Hall 2025, 252).

As far as disconnecting from epistemic coloniality is concerned, substituting Northern epistemologies with those of the South is also insufficient. Instead of treating these knowledges as something to be universalised, or imported from South to North, challenging the Eurocentricity of knowledge production must, like ideas of decolonization, pluriversal politics, and the undoing of the epistemological Global North–South dualism itself, be ethically and politically situated in specific knowledge contexts that are always complex and messy (Hall 2025, 226). I explore this issue further in "Pluriversal Socialism," where I discuss how the social practice artist Andrea Francke highlights the problem with uncritically adopting fashionable concepts such as decolonization that are actually highly "experience- or situation-specific." When these ideas are applied indiscriminately, as if they hold an unquestioned moral authority, they can become empty buzzwords, hindering rather than enhancing the possibility of meaningful engagement. Francke emphasizes that decolonization is not a singular, universally applicable concept or theory but rather a "situated conversation" shaped by particular histories and embodied experiences. Latin American decolonial thought, for instance, emerges from the lived realities of societies that were created—and continue to be profoundly shaped by—the colonial period in which the Spanish subjugation of Indigenous peoples often focused on their eradication. This differs significantly from the struggles for independence and decolonization in African nations colonized by France, Belgium, or Portugal, where the dynamics of colonial rule took other forms. The way decolonization is approached in contemporary England—particularly in universities, libraries, archives, and museums—diverges again (Francke 2020, 199–200; Hall 2021b, 23–24).

The specific knowledge situation I am operating in is that of a theorist working within the Western academic-industrial complex. It's in large part the structural power of this hegemonic culture and its liberal humanist articulations I'm endeavoring to analyze, deconstruct, and transform. This is why I'm referring to theorists here such as Arturo Escobar, Alberto Moreiras, and Walter Mignolo (as well as Maria Lugones below): because in this particular context they are part of the situated conversation about the liberal Eurocentricity of knowledge production and how we might do

things differently. I'm certainly not claiming I can somehow speak for Latin Americans—nor even that I know who the *true* or *best* representatives of Latin American thought are. Instead, I prefer to embrace a philosophy of scaling small (i.e., keeping my intellectual ambitions modest rather striving to produce a project, process, or theory "*to rule them all*"). As I make clear in *Masked Media*, I see this scaling small approach as "having the potential to create the conditions for a radical diversity, pluriversality, or multi-polarity of knowledges, none of which are complete and all of which are contestable" [231]). When possible, I also prefer to adopt a non-extractivist methodology that aligns with what some Latin Americanists, Mato included (in a Duke University Press journal no less), describe in terms of knowing or studying "with" rather than "about" or even "on behalf of" (2000b). For instance, I make most of my scholarship and research, along with the associated tools, resources, and infrastructure, available on an open-access basis—and, wherever feasible and appropriate, open source too. Those in other locations around the world can thus use, copy, share, build-upon, modify, translate, or ignore it, as they see fit, depending on what they consider to be most suited to their experience-specific context. Should they seek support or collaboration with realizing their own projects and agendas, then I do what I can. Over the years, this commitment to *knowing with* has led to my working with several Latin American thinkers who do live in the region as it is historically and geographically defined (some of whom I reference below).

To return to the discussion of legacy theorists (among whom we can now include Moreiras and Mignolo), and to "pirate" or détourne the arguments of Ahmed and Todd once more: What I'm doing in saying all this is holding these theorists "up to the goals they define for themselves" (Todd 2016, 17). It's the structures of culture and the university that stop them from realizing many of their "most transformative" ambitions, including exploding these structures, blowing them apart (Todd 2016, 18; Ahmed 2014). The pre-programmed liberal humanist "dimensions of the academy itself prevent the reimagining" of theory and scholarship—and with them our modes of thinking-living in the world (Todd 2016, 18). As the work of Ahmed and Todd bears witness, it's hard to think of many academic theorists whose responses to the supremacy of White, male, middle-class, *liberal humanist* culture that's behind the marginalization of people from working-class, Black, Global Majority and LGBTQQIP2SAA+ communities *do not* take the categories and frameworks of White, male, middle-class, *liberal humanism* as their default starting point for doing so (Ahmed 2014). This is because the

de-liberalization of theory cannot take place until theorists themselves are prepared to engage in the de-liberalization process in a substantive, structural, and physical way, and are willing to recognize that this liberal humanist space is an existing and continuous, if exhausted, reality (Todd 2016, 17).

Many of my collaborators and I are endeavoring to do just this: We're testing some of the strange, new, unsettling—what, following Escobar (2020) and Maria Lugones (2010, 743), we might refer to as non-universal, non-modernist, non-liberal humanist—modes of creating and sharing knowledge and theory that are now possible, in no small part thanks to the emergence of digital media technologies. If some of us are associated with open access, this has never simply been about addressing the contradiction whereby the public pays twice for academic research: first to fund the work itself, and then again to access it through journals and presses. Nor has it only been about challenging the power imbalances in academic publishing and finding alternative ways of organizing scholarly work—though ending the dominance of companies such as Elsevier and fostering self-managed publishing communities instead is certainly part of it. Nor has our interest primarily been tied to open access's relationship with social justice, even if it was a key theme of the third Radical Open Access conference colleagues organized in Cambridge in April 2025. What perhaps drives us most is the potential that open access offers to help us reconceive—practically and theoretically—not just how knowledge is created and shared, but also how we think, work, and live, in ways that are very different from the Euro-Western, White, male, middle-class norms I analyze in the first part of this book. Norm-critical publishing projects such as *Culture Machine*, Open Humanities Press, Liquid Books, Living Books About Life, *Photomediations*, the Radical Open Access Collective, How to Practise the Culture-Led Re-Commoning of Cities, and the *Robot Review of Books* are attempting to unsettle our accepted, common-sense, liberal humanist ideas of the autonomous subject, the individualistic human author, the unified, stable, fixed and finished book, originality, creativity, and copyright.

Let me take the last of these to provide another specific example. There are a number of reasons copyright is crucial in this context. For one thing, it is a major driver of inequality in the twenty-first century. In this respect, copyright plays a pivotal but often overlooked role with regard to understanding the roots of disparities of wealth in modern societies (Bellos and Montagu 2024, 326). For another, copyright disproportionately serves corporate interests—those of tech monopolies, music labels, publishers—while restricting access

to knowledge, ideas, and the cultural commons. The wealthiest corporations globally derive their power primarily from owning copyright and patents, with "sixteen of the fifty richest people in the world" amassing their fortunes entirely or partially from copyright-related industries (Bellos and Montagu, 325). The main reason copyright is so significant in this context, however, is because of its close ties to the production of liberal humanist subjectivity and agency. As we know, liberalism precludes any understanding of human identities as collective in order to value the right to life, liberty, and property of what are usually well-off, Euro-Western, White, male individuals. Copyright plays a significant role in the maintenance and promotion of such liberal values by virtue of its emphasis on the figure of the unique human author.

In terms of the rights and responsibilities associated with personhood, numerous legal systems do not actually require the subject in question to be of human origin. Various natural entities have therefore been granted legal personhood status, contra Locke. In October 2011 Bolivia approved the Framework Law on Mother Earth and Integral Development to Live Well, which accords legal personhood rights to nature. In March 2017, the High Court in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand ruled that the River Ganges and its primary tributary, the Yamuna, be granted the legal status of living entities, having distinct personas with all the associated "rights, duties and liabilities of a living person." Copyright, by contrast, is strongly biased in favor of creative works whose authorship can be attributed unambiguously to a singular and unique human subject. Evidence the US Copyright Office Review Board ruling regarding Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial, a science fiction–themed image generated by the text-to-graphics AI platform Midjourney in response to prompts from the artist Jason M. Allen. Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial won top prize in the digital category at the 2022 Colorado State Fair annual art competition. Nevertheless, the board decided that it did not qualify for copyright protection because the latter excludes works authored extensively by nonhumans. (Intriguingly, Allen's prompts might themselves be eligible for protection in the US if they demonstrate originality or creativity in their own right on his part.)[2]

[2] Allen has since complained that, because Théâtre d'Opéra Spatial cannot be copyrighted, it is itself being copied without his permission, and that he is experiencing "price erosion" as result. He has consequently appealed the ruling of the US Copyright Office and applied to have his "painting" registered as a copyrighted work (Ropek 2024).

It is also worth noting that in December 2023 a court in the People's Republic of China ruled that a person named Li *did* have copyright over an image generated using AI, this time the Stable Diffusion model (Guadamuz 2023). With regard to writing, meanwhile, the US Copyright Office (USCO) granted Elisa Shupe a limited copyright in April 2024,

More often than not, whenever the need is raised for our copyright laws to be reformed to make them better suited to the nature of culture and creativity in the twenty-first century, it's the North American non-profit organization Creative Commons (CC) that is positioned as leading the way. Given it's estimated that there are now around two billion CC-licensed works, this is perhaps not surprising. It's important to realize, however, that Creative Commons does not resolve the problem of copyright's reliance on the figure of the autonomous human subject. As I have shown elsewhere, Creative Commons offers a range of relatively simple licenses for individuals (or their community or corporate stand-ins) to select from if they wish to openly share their work with others under copyright law (Hall 2023b; 2016, 4). These licenses can then be applied to creative material such as books, which are regarded as being ontologically separate from their legal human authors. Yet there lies at the heart of Creative Commons a basic problem regarding the commons: namely, that, in spite of its name, CC is not in fact concerned with establishing a commons, creative or otherwise. This is apparent from the manner in which Creative Commons prioritizes the safeguarding of copyright holders' rights over their creative work ahead of assigning rights to it to prospective users. It enables holders to choose from CC's six different types of licenses according to what they consider to be the most appropriate for *them*—based on the specific rights *they* wish to retain or waive, such as attribution or adaptation—plus its CC0 "no rights reserved" public domain tool by which *they* can decide to relinquish their copyright. "Only the copyright holder or someone with express permission from the copyright holder can apply a CC license or CC0 to a copyrighted work" (Creative Commons 2023a). That a license can only be applied by the copyright holder means Creative Commons is ill-suited to work that—as in the case of some Indigenous communities, for example—is collectively produced in the first place, and for which there may not be an original, identifiable, copyright holder.[3] And, to be sure, its underlying liberal individualism is

for her autofiction book *AI Machinations: Tangled Webs and Typed Words*, which was self-published on Amazon under the pseudonym Ellen Rae and written with the extensive assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT. Rather than recognizing Shupe as the author of the entire text, as is typical for written works, the USCO acknowledged her as the author of the "selection, coordination, and arrangement" of the AI-generated content. This allows the book to be protected from unauthorized copying, but the individual sentences and paragraphs themselves are not copyrighted, meaning they could potentially be reorganized and reused to create a different book (Knibbs 2024). In addition, USCO reported that over a thousand AI "enhanced" works had also been registered by January 2025 (Werth 2025).

[3] For a range of Traditional Knowledge and Biocultural Labels that provide Indigenous communities with practical tools for managing, sharing, and protecting digital cultural

another aspect that makes plain Creative Commons' lack of interest in creating a commons. Far from championing a collective approach, CC merely offers a range of "simple, standardized," some rights reserved licenses that creators can freely select from, again "on conditions of [*their*] choice," according to what best suits *their* needs (Creative Commons 2023b). Consequently, it is not actually taken up with establishing a shared pool of non-proprietary spaces and resources that all commoners can equally own, access, and use, often without conforming to individual ownership models, even though that is the most common interpretation of the commons; nor with prioritizing the collective social relations that are necessary for commoners to jointly produce, manage, and sustain these resources and themselves as a community. Instead, Creative Commons has its basis in the idea that, legally, any original work created by a singular human author belongs to them in the first instance as their intellectual property. To be clear: This is not an accident. It is very much by design. To recast the words of open-source architecture advocate Carlo Ratti, it serves to ensure that, while a certain "flexibility, evolution and adaptation" are possible, the "powerful impetus of human motivation remains intact: acknowledgment of authorship" (2015, 86).[4]

What does all this mean for us as would-be non-universal, non-modernist, non-liberal theorists? Well, to put it frankly, it means we may scatter our texts with terms such as *relational*, *ontological,* and *entanglement*, and talk about how as humans we are intimately enmeshed with our material and immaterial environment. We may even write about the transition to a new,

heritage in relation to copyright concerns, see Local Contexts: https://localcontexts.org/about/.

[4] Such recognition also forms the foundation of utilitarian justifications for copyright, often positioned as an alternative to the romantic or modernist conception of the author as autonomous human genius. Here, the purpose of acknowledging authorship is to provide creatives with incentives to make and distribute original works of art and culture for the benefit of society. In this context, the reason intellectual property rights cannot be assigned to nonhuman entities such as AI is not because they are not human and so cannot produce works as personal expressions of their unique minds and lived experiences. (This is how originality is defined in much copyright doctrine: as the author being the origin of the work, rather than on the basis of the work itself and how it is achieved being particularly imaginative or novel.) Nor is it because of the Lockean-derived argument that, since they are not human, they have no natural right to turn the products of their labor into private property while preventing others from doing so. It is not even because their capacity to display judgment and take creative decisions is not (yet) sophisticated enough to make their outputs equivalent to their human-authored counterparts (Chiang 2024). Instead, it is because nonhumans, unlike humans, do not require incentives to create. As with Creative Commons and the romantic author, however, all three—the personality-rights-based theory, the Lockean natural rights framework, and the utilitarian justification for copyright—are underpinned by the possessive individualism of liberal philosophy (Craig and Kerr 2021).

more commons-oriented, pluriversal, postcapitalist way of life, which uses a radical redistribution of cultural opportunities and resources to place an emphasis on degrowth, post-development, and post-extractivism in an effort to repair the destruction of the planet brought about by the mass production and consumption of commodities. Yet if we assert copyright over our texts—even on a Creative Commons basis—we are not actually challenging the modernist ontological division between human and nonhuman others, be they animal, vegetable, mineral, or technological. On the contrary, we are excluding from our work in advance any rigorous appreciation of this *entangled*, *relational*, *processual* aspect of our identity: of the human author's co-constitutive psychological, social, and biological relations with a diverse array of nonhuman elements and forces. In other words, rather than being the result of thinking *in* and *with* and *of* the world—of an interactive collaboration between humans and nonhuman actors such as books, say—we are unquestioningly presenting our writing as being the original creation of a fundamentally individualized human author to which it can be attributed. Still further, not only do we exclusively possess proprietorial ownership and control of our texts, as authors we are also positioning ourselves as existing prior to and independent from the very meshwork of relations out of which—according to our own supposedly non-liberal philosophy—both the human and nonhuman arises in the first place.[5]

[5] An earlier version of this argument was initiated in Adema and Hall (2016). In "The Death of the AI Author," Carys Craig and Ian Kerr endeavor to provide a more ontological exploration of "what an author must *be*" by moving away from the figure of the romantic authorial self as rights-bearing legal subject (2021, 44). This figure, they argue, is a "mythic" ideological construct that is also bolstered by legal and philosophical liberalism. And, like liberalism, the romantic author lies at the heart of both copyright doctrine and contemporary ideas of AI authorship, too. According to Craig and Kerr, AI models should not be "treated as special-purpose human beings" producing work-for-hire (59); nor should AI be mischaracterized as a radically individualized creative entity capable of being the "sole creator and master" of a text (67). Engaging with some of the most influential thinkers on the subject—Martha Woodmansee, Mark Rose, James Boyle, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Nancy Millar, Peggy Kamuf—they maintain that authorship is both "a fundamentally human endeavor" and "fundamentally relational." It is "a dialogic and communicative act that is inherently social, with the cultivation of selfhood and social relations being the entire point of the practice" (48, 45, 31–32).

Craig and Kerr may view creativity as an ongoing "collaborative and cumulative process" in which the "act of authorship cannot be separated from a social context" (47, 82). Even as they emphasize *relationality*, however, they retain the normative modernist categories that ensure those living persons engaged in this dialogic process of "authorship with relational autonomy" are kept ontologically distinct from nonliving artifacts (84). The AI author, they insist, "bears no ontological resemblance to the human author" (85–86). As a result, they offer a vision of authorship that is "dynamic" and based on "relational theory," a vision they contrast to both the romantic and machinic author (55, 80). Yet Craig and Kerr stop short of advocating a radical ontological (and potentially de-liberalizing) under-

We can thus see that our copyright laws do far more than protect the author's economic and moral rights over their creative work, preventing others from using it without permission, which is the main function they are conventionally held to have. They also play a significant role in shaping the author as a sovereign, Euro-Western, modernist, White, male, middle-class, liberal, human subject. On top of this, copyright helps to produce a situation in which there is no simple way for us to avoid adhering to liberal humanist modes of being and doing as writers, no matter how ontologically relational and co-constitutive the content of our theory may be. There are few if any alternatives to publishing and sharing our work on a liberal humanist basis that are legally and professionally recognized.[6] Declining to assert copyright certainly doesn't elude the problem. In many legal jurisdictions, if copyright is not explicitly claimed it is assumed and assigned regardless.[7] As

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standing of relationality of the kind found in the work of theorists such as Escobar. Their account of the "ontology of authorship and its social significance" is careful not to critique humanism, for instance (73). Authorship for them remains "exclusively within the human domain" (58). They also reject the possibility of the nonhuman author, along with the threat of the transformation of copyright law to reward any such nonhuman production. Instead, what they mean by relational is a "human interchange" that embeds authors-cum-speaking subjects within their otherwise black-boxed social and cultural relations (82, 55).

Granted, Craig and Kerr acknowledge that AI machines are not "islands" and that their outputs "depend upon, and are inextricably linked to, a vast sea of texts authored by human actions, interactions, and creative processes" (67). However, there is little sense of the human's *entangled, intra-active relations with a diverse array of human and nonhuman elements* of the kind that creates fundamental problems for the normative modernist division between human and machine. Ultimately, it is hard not to conclude that Craig and Kerr's "de-romanticizing" of AI authorship is an effort to preserve a more nuanced version of the Euro-Western, modernist, humanist author—and by extension copyright—rather than to fundamentally challenge it (82). In their concern to demonstrate that a "human author as perquisite to copyright" does not necessitate the romantic author, the whole thrust of "The Death of the AI Author" appears to be to rescue humanism and copyright (and, intentionally or not, the inequalities of economic wealth and power they entail) in the face of what Craig and Kerr see as the mistaken claims to authorship of robots and AI (58, 45).

[6] When detailing a range of alternative contracts, manifestos, principles, protocols, labels, and notices—created largely in the context of Indigenous knowledge practices that make conditions of data sharing and reuse explicit, including both the FAIR and CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance—two of my recent collaborators, artist and designer Femke Snelting and artist and researcher Eva Weinmayr, observe that "the mapped documents seem not much concerned with undoing the figure of the author." They also note that these documents "tend to be neutral or in support of conventional copyright, which seems to be the available legal framework in which Indigenous materials can currently be protected." Likewise, it is striking, Snelting and Weinmayr continue, given "the close ties between the coloniality of the modern subject and the ways individual authorship is constructed . . . that the implications of this framework—based on private property—is not given much consideration" (Snelting and Weinmayr 2024, 24).

[7] This has not always been the case. In *Duchamp Is My Lawyer*, pirate librarian Kenneth Goldsmith emphasizes how, prior to the Copyright Act of 1976, copyright in the US was

a result, our copyright laws represent a substantial obstacle to any authors who *do* wish to performatively explore other, non-liberal and nonhumanist possibilities for working and living. And alternative possibilities that have the capacity to recognize and embrace the consequences of texts emerging from the complex interactions of heterogenous assemblage of humans and nonhumans are no exception.

All of which explains why my collaborators and I are interested in experimenting with different approaches to copyright, including "piracy." Piracy is placed in quotation marks because our approach to it is an ethical rather than a moral one. A moralistic position already knows what piracy is ahead of any intellectual questioning, regardless of whether it is seen as right (e.g., as a struggle for the common good against the privation of knowledge, exemplified by the heroic "shadow" or "pirate" library activist), or wrong (as in the case of those Big AI companies accused of stealing the copyrighted work of others by using the contents of shadow libraries to train their large language models). By contrast, "a responsible ethical (as opposed to moralistic) approach to piracy" would, as I insist in *A Stubborn Fury*, "*not* presume to know what it is in advance. Rather, the question of piracy would remain far less clear-cut and much more open and undecided" (Hall 2021a, 52). As Snelting has observed with regard to libraries such as Sci-Hub and Library Genesis: "The disobedient stance of piracy can obscure the way it keeps categories of knowledge in place, either by calling upon universalist sentiments for the right to access, by relying on conventional modes of care or by avoiding the complicated subject of the law altogether. If we want to find ways to make the public debate on shadow libraries transcend the juridical binary of illegal versus legal, and claim political legitimacy for acting out their potential, we need to experiment with how these libraries are a form of publishing, how they rethink the social contracts that link libraries, librarians, readers and books" (Snelting 2019). And Big AI, we might now add.

In *Pirate Philosophy* I associate such an ethical approach with acting *something like* pirate philosophers. In doing so I draw on the term's etymological origins. The word "pirate" has its roots in the ancient Greek *piratis*, from the noun *peira* and verb *pirao*, the latter meaning to endeavor, make an attempt, try or test. In modern Greek both *piragma,* teasing, and *pirazo*, give trouble, also stem from *piratis*, pirate (Hall 2016, 1, 16). Acting as something like pirate philosophers is therefore one way for us to try out and put to the test new,

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opt-in rather than automatic. A document or film wasn't copyrighted unless you actively registered the copyright—something many people failed to do (2020, 70).

potentially transformative, de-liberalizing ways of creating, publishing, and sharing knowledge and ideas. As far as copyright—and teasing and giving trouble—is concerned, they include no copyright, Collective Conditions for Re-Use (CC4r), and CC-BY.

No Copyright

Given that the copyright licenses that exist for books today are in blatant contradiction with its own enactment of a pirate philosophy, *A Stubborn Fury* doesn't have one at all. Instead, it is published on a "no copyright" basis. In place of a copyright statement, it has the following wording:

> Both the "author" and publishers encourage the use of *A Stubborn Fury: How Writing Works in Elitist Britain* for non-commercial purposes that critique, disrupt and create trouble for capitalist property relations. This statement is provided in the absence of a license that is consistent with the approach to copyright that is articulated in *A Stubborn Fury*, and to acknowledge but deny the copyrighting that is performed by a public domain cc-o license or by default where all rights are waived. (Hall 2021a, 4)

Collective Conditions for Re-Use (CC4r)

In keeping with its own articulation of a radically relational, de-liberalizing approach, *Masked Media* is explicitly presented as *not* being an extensively human-authored work. It makes clear with its opening paragraph that *Masked Media* has "been generated by an heterogenous assemblage of humans and nonhumans," including AI text generation technologies. "As such, even though this book appears under the proper name 'Gary Hall,' it is not the intellectual property of a single human individual. *Masked Media* is published under a Collective Conditions for Re-Use licence to reflect this fact."

Developed by Constant, the association for arts and media in Brussels (for which Snelting provided artistic direction until 2021), "Collective Conditions for Re-Use" (CC4r) is motivated by the values of Free Culture and is concerned with articulating "conditions for re-using authored materials." At the same time, CC4r is attempting to move Free Culture in a direction where authorship and creativity are understood as being always-already collective, collaborative, and situated, and as involving "human-machine collaborations and other-than-human contributions"—rather than being "derived from individual genius," as they are for conventional copyright

(Constant 2023; Hall 2023b). On its own admission, CC4r is perhaps too provisional to be considered an actual license (Constant 2023) or "enforcible legal contract," acting as more of a reminder, invitation, and appeal (Snelting and Weinmayr 2024, 5, 25).[8] As things currently stand in the majority of legal systems, however, a work created through substantial human-machine collaborations and other-than-human contributions is not considered entitled to copyright protection regardless.

Creative Commons CC-BY

While there is not a license currently available to us that *is* entirely consistent with an ontological philosophy in which authorship and creativity are inherently collaborative and always-already collective, CC4r certainly comes closer than most. Yet what is demonstrated by the Combinatorial Books: Gathering Flowers book series, edited by Janneke Adema, Simon Bowie, Rebekka Kiesewetter, and myself, is that taking part in the process of de-liberalization is not reliant solely on the existence of a correspondingly radical form of copyright such as CC4r, or even "no copyright."

A frequently chosen and often mandated Creative Commons license for open-access (OA) research publications is CC-BY. (The current Horizon Europe program includes the release of articles under a CC-BY license as part of its OA requirements, for instance.) CC-BY is the most permissive of Creative Commons licenses. It "enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator" (2023a). Few authors, publishers, or readers take anything even approaching maximum advantage of the possibilities for reusing research that is afforded by CC-BY and other Creative Commons licenses, however. No doubt this is due to deep-seated concerns about academic authenticity, integrity, originality, and plagiarism.

A collaboration between the COPIM (Community-Led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs) project and Open Humanities Press (OHP), the Combinatorial Books series endeavors to intervene in this situation by actively encouraging the rewriting and remixing of appropriately licensed open-access titles from—in the first instance—OHP's back catalogue. In

[8] CC4r has subsequently been renamed "Collective Commitment to Reuse" (CC4r-r) to reflect this shift from a legal tool to an ongoing process, and with it from "*liability* (licence)" to "*practicing solidarity* (commitment)," whether it be in terms of the provision of knowledge, money, time, or support (Snelting and Weinmayr 2024, 26).

the process it draws attention to the fact that Creative Commons, for all its limitations, harbors a certain degree of potential for:

- privileging remixing and re-versioning over the emphasis on fixed expression of certain forms of copyright law;
- enacting fluid, processual modes of authorship and creativity more concerned with repeating, modifying, and forking than with the production of perfect, stable, immutable texts;
- demonstrating that books and the contents they contain are never simply the product of their legal authors in the first place: that even apparently virtuosic authorial practices are always-already collective, collaborative, emergent, relational, pirate;
- problematizing what Constant refer to as "linear orders of creation," whereby an author's existing published work is subsequently changed and rewritten by others to produce a "new" derivative of it (2023);
- taking a collective and collaborative approach to the adoption of such different notions of authorship and creativity.

Furthermore, this is the case despite the fact that credit must still be awarded to the initial human creator if the Creative Commons license employed includes the "BY" (attribution) element—CC being very much based on a before-and-after sequence of authorship. To capitalize on Creative Commons' transformative potential in this respect, we just need to be courageous enough to transition away from the liberal humanist model of the self-identical author as individual genius working in isolation from all human (and nonhuman) others to publish original, perfect, immutable texts. It's a model that continues to dominate both academia and open-access publishing.

To be clear: The reason it's worth emphasizing this transformative capacity on CC's part is that the lack of a non-liberal copyright license fully aligned with a radically-relational ontological approach should not be taken as justification for persisting with the default practice of publishing original, fixed and finished books that are single-authored by autonomous named human individuals under strict, all-rights-reserved copyright conditions, which is how most of the academic world operates. Nor with publishing books CC-BY *as if they were* original, perfect, fixed and finished, which is how most of the open-access publishing world operates. When it comes to

de-liberalizing culture, a lot can still be achieved. This is because, unless they include the "ND" (no derivatives) element, CC licenses remove many of the legal obstacles to a more radical reuse of texts, permitting books to be collectively and collaboratively remixed, re-edited, adapted, built upon, and transformed, at the very least.[9]

Ecological Rewriting: Situated Engagements with The Chernobyl Herbarium, the first volume in the Combinatorial Books series, thus involved a group of nine (re)writers made up of scholars, technologists, and students from the Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México, under the direction of Gabriela Méndez Cota (2023): Etelvina Bernal Méndez, Sandra Hernández Reyes, Sandra Loyola Guízar, Fernanda Rodríguez González, Yareni Monteón López, Deni Garciamoreno Becerril, Nidia Rosales Moreno, Xóchitl Arteaga Villamil, and Carolina Cuevas Parra. The conventional system, according to which final authorship credit is awarded to these (re)writers in the form of attributions and acknowledgements, provides a means of making their roles apparent within the limits of our current copyright and authorship regimes, of which Creative Commons is a part (Adema et al. 2021). Yet there are others who were also involved to a significant extent in the creation of *Ecological Rewriting*. The kind of work they did, however, all too frequently goes unrecognized and unrewarded by the academic reputation economy, predisposed as it is toward authorship (and to a lesser extent editorship). Kiesewetter has compiled an initial list of these people and their roles. As first published in 2022, it runs as follows:

> Conceptualising: Janneke Adema, Simon Bowie, Gary Hall, Rebekka Kiesewetter, Gabriela Méndez Cota
> Copy-editing: tbd
> Curating: Janneke Adema, Gary Hall, Rebekka Kiesewetter, Julien McHardy, Gabriela Méndez Cota
> Designing: Janneke Adema, Simon Bowie, Rebekka Kiesewetter, Gabriela Méndez Cota
> Developing: Simon Bowie, Marcell Mars, Rancho Electrónico
> Editing: Janneke Adema, Gabriela Méndez Cota

[9] It is also worth noting that, like CC4r, a Creative Commons License, for some, has "no standing in law." They claim that Creative Commons operates "outside the laws of copyright" and lacks the power to change those laws (Bellos and Montagu 2024, 323–22). Unsurprisingly, this view differs from the stance of Creative Commons itself. CC insists that its "licenses are drafted to be enforceable around the world, and have been enforced in court in various jurisdictions." According to Creative Commons, "the licenses have never been held unenforceable or invalid" (Creative Commons 2024).

Peer-reviewing: tbd
Project-managing: Janneke Adema, Gary Hall, Rebekka Kiesewetter, Gabriela Méndez Cota, Tobias Steiner
Proofreading: tbd
Publishing: Gary Hall & Open Humanities Press
*(Tech-)*Supporting and Advising: Simon Bowie, Marcell Mars, Rancho Electrónico, Terence Smyre, Tobias Steiner
Tech-reviewing: tbd
Translating: Gabriela Méndez Cota
Workshopping: Janneke Adema, Marta Cabrera, Carolina Cuevas, Rachel Douglas-Jones, Mariana Florian Tirado, Oscar Guarin, Gary Hall, Kat Jungnickel, Rebekka Kiesewetter, Julien McHardy, Gabriela Méndez Cota, Tobias Steiner, Simon Worthington

The volume from the Open Humanities back catalogue that this heterogenous community focused on was *The Chernobyl Herbarium: Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness,* by philosopher Michael Marder and artist Anaïs Tondeur, which OHP published in its Critical Climate Change series under a CC-BY-SA (Share Alike) license in 2016. At the same time, what was so exciting about the bilingual, book-length response to *The Chernobyl Herbarium* of Méndez Cota et al. is that it went far beyond merely rewriting and remixing Marder and Tondeur's work, even though such an approach would have aligned with the initial remit of the Combinatorial Books series. It also demonstrated how Creative Commons licenses enable a shift from the collaborative reuse of volumes published open access, to the always-already collective and situated creation of whole new "combinatorial" books—such as *Ecological Rewriting* (Hall 2023b). Rather than simply adapting, editing or remixing *The Chernobyl Herbarium*, *Ecological Rewriting* expanded upon it, notwithstanding it is a new book that simultaneously comments on and engages with the original (to continue, for a moment, with the heuristic that concepts such as "new" and "original" remain fit for purpose).

The book's platform and software providers, distributors, retailers, purchasers, and readers, along with the various groups that make up the publisher Open Humanities Press, the Combinatorial Books series, and the COPIM project (the Combinatorial Books series was initially developed as part of COPIM's Experimental Publishing and Re-Use work package [2023])—were all part of this diverse community of overlapping communities (Kiesewetter 2022). The different kinds of processual, ongoing, and open-ended (rather

CHAPTER SIX

Coda

As theorists, the writing of books is incredibly important to us. Still, I'm not going to go into detail about my and my collaborators' projects in *Defund Culture*, beyond outlining a few of them like this. Partly because there are too many—more than twenty now—for it to be practicable here.[1] But mainly because, if we *are* to actively participate in the process of de-liberalization in a substantive way with a view to transforming theory and scholarship, it's crucial we don't continue to operate unthinkingly in pre-formatted, Euro-Western, modernist, liberal humanist terms. As I said before, we don't necessarily need new books of theory—not even of anti-capitalist resistance and revolution. That threatens to be just more of the same. It's theory we need to revolutionize (de Sousa Santos 2018, ix; Hall 2023c).[2]

[1] They include: *Culture Machine*; CSeARCH; Open Humanities Press; "Pirate Philosophy 1.0"; Open Humanities Notebook; Liquid Books; Wikination; Living Books About Life; Culture Machine Live; Project 5 of the International Association for Visual Culture (IAVC); Media Gifts; Liquid Theory TV; *Photomediations Machine*; *Photomediations: An Open Book*; *Photomediations: A Reader*; *after.video*; Disrupting the *Human*ities: Towards Posthumanities; Radical Open Access Collective; ScholarLed; COPIM (Community-Led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs); Centre for Postdigital Cultures; The Post Office; How to Practise the Culture-Led Re-Commoning of Cities; *Robot Review of Books*. For more details, including URLs, see my website, www.garyhall.info, and 2025 book, *Masked Media*, and accompanying Linktree (https://linktr.ee/maskedmedia1).

[2] I'm aware that, due to the accusations of harassment that have been made against him, Boaventura de Sousa Santos has stepped back from all his activities at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. Meanwhile, the Latin American Council of Social Sciences has halted its collaboration with him, as has the Spanish newspaper *Público*, where he was a columnist. As a result, some consider citing his theory to be problematic, including one of the peer reviewers of this book. My previous work referencing de Sousa Santos was written largely before these allegations first emerged in April 2023. I want to emphasize that my references to his theory here—however minimal,

And we need to do so not least by placing greater emphasis on the importance of experimenting with different behaviors and gestures as theorists and researchers; different forms of the relation between us and our media information technologies, including those that are shaped and controlled by our systems of copyright (Hall 2025, 265). Following on from this, there's a sense that one of the most appropriate ways to grasp and experience my and my collaborators' theory-performances is to engage with them in their specific contextual settings, which encompass multiple histories and potential futures and are always in flux. Many of these projects are focused on generating and sustaining relationships and communities, for instance, including communities of communities, such as Open Humanities Press or the Radical Open Access Collective. Yet as Samuel Moore, another of my collaborators, has emphasized, a complete understanding of such community dynamics often necessitates being actively involved with that community (2017, 27; as cited in Masterman 2020).

In summary, these explorations in norm-critical publishing are striving to disrupt our entrenched, conventional, liberal humanist ideas by highlighting a range of *alternative*, non-oppositionally different concepts and values related to the composition, production, and circulation of contemporary theory and research (many of which we've learned from legacy theory and theorists). At the present time, an incomplete and ever-evolving index of such ideas—which no single work or project could ever hope to enact in its entirety—includes: creativity as repetition, modulation, détournement, disappropriation, and 'piracy'; practices of remixing, reconfiguring, refashioning, re-versioning, reframing, and recoding; and a focus on collectivity, made up of neither singularities nor pluralities, the singular and plural being rather co-emergent. It also includes pluriversality—understood as non-universal and non-modernist-liberal—alongside ontological relationality,

limited to an author-date citation in parentheses and a book listing in the bibliography as they are—should not be interpreted as a defense of, or support for, de Sousa Santos. I take very seriously what those who present themselves as having "suffered different types of violence as a result of the pattern of abuse of power that was naturalized in the work teams led by Boaventura de Sousa Santos" say (Collective of Victims 2023). Nevertheless, this situation raises the question of whether the "person" can be separated from the "work," the "text," the "theory." I notice, for instance, that when dismissing him from his position on their Assembly of Judges, the International Rights of Nature Tribunal stated: "We are not proposing to throw his categories of thought into the void, but to emphasize the lack of moral and ethical integrity, as a human being and as an academic of Boaventura" (Greene and Martone 2024). Similarly, the Collective of Victims is careful to stipulate that they do not want to cancel de Sousa Santos or his theory. Rather, they want him to take "real accountability" for the "contradictions" between his theory and the "power relations normalized in his work culture" (2023). For now, I have taken the decision to be guided by them.

intra-active collaboration of humans and nonhumans, and co-constitution. These concepts and values emphasize the event over the finished object or artifact; embrace polyphony and processuality; and foreground performativity, prefiguration, and situatedness. Further, they advocate for responsible openness, making and unmaking, learning and unlearning, and the use of language that is sometimes difficult, complex, "academic" or "intellectual." In this way our norm-critical theory-performances are designed to help us engage in the de-liberalization of our institutions, culture, and even our bodies and how we live together.

This is also what I'm trying to achieve with *Defund Culture* and its publication through mediastudies.press, a non-profit, scholar-led, open-access publisher, under a Collective Conditions for Re-Use (CC4r) license. More than just an analysis of the liberal humanist nature of theory and scholarship, important though that is, this book demonstrates how we can take an active part in the norm-critical process of transforming them.

I'm therefore going to end by expanding on the three initial ideas outlined above for funding a more radical redistribution of opportunities and resources by adding one more: defunding the UK's "gold-standard" intellectual property and copyright regime. This could involve reducing or eliminating public support for copyright enforcement bodies such as the UK Intellectual Property Office (IPO) and Trading Standards offices, which oversee copyright and trademark laws. At the same time, subsidies could be shifted away from copyright-heavy, restrictive, and closed-access industries toward the exploration of alternative models for generating and disseminating knowledge and ideas, such as those associated with p2p data, file, and text sharing, radical open-access publishing, and open GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums). But I'm also thinking of Constant's conception of authorship and creativity as inherently collective and collaborative, and as emerging through human-machine interactions and "other-than-human contributions," rather than purely from individual human genius, as traditional copyright assumes. In addition, aid for government-backed anti-piracy initiatives could be withdrawn, and excessive criminal penalties for copyright infringement, which disproportionately target individuals rather than corporations, abolished. Instead, funding could be redirected from industries and institutions that rely on copyright monopolies to non-rivalrous projects and enterprises that foster the sharing and reuse of art and culture on a responsibly open (i.e., situated and non-universal) basis. As part of this redistribution, investment could prioritize decentralized, non-

proprietary, and community-managed funding models—such as platform cooperatives for artists—along with commons-oriented initiatives. Where appropriate, the latter prioritization could include the use of free/libre/open-source (FLOSS) creative tools, collective licensing models, and even the abolition of IP and copyright altogether.

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Defund culture: A radical proposal

Calls to expand public investment in the arts often treat the existing cultural and institutional landscape as a given. In *Defund Culture*, Gary Hall challenges this assumption, asking instead: What kinds of culture are being supported, through which institutions, and to whose benefit?

In doing so, the book foregrounds the structural inequalities that shape Britain's creative and intellectual life. Drawing on critical theory, political philosophy, and cultural policy, Hall shows how the dominance of white, male, middle- and upper-class voices in the arts, media, and academy is sustained through longstanding funding arrangements and institutional hierarchies. Expanding access within this system—however well intentioned—will not, on its own, produce structural change.

Rather than offering a programme of reform, *Defund Culture* explores what it might mean to disinvest from cultural institutions as they currently operate. Taking cues from abolitionist calls to defund the police, Hall proposes redistributing resources away from elite institutions and toward more collective, commons-oriented, and radically relational alternatives grounded in redistribution, institutional transformation, and epistemic pluriversality.

Gary Hall is Professor of Media at Coventry University. His work sits at the intersection of critical theory, media philosophy, and cultural politics. He is the author of *Culture in Bits* (2002), *Digitize This Book!* (2008), and *Pirate Philosophy* (2016), and co-founder of the open-access journal *Culture Machine* and Open Humanities Press.

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